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Single, White and Southern: slaveholding women in the nineteenth-century American South, 1830-1870

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	III
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	IV
INTRODUCTION	1
SOURCES	6
ORGANISATION	9
LITERATURE REVIEW	15
CHAPTER ONE: THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININITY IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH	34
THE ANTEBELLUM SETTING: CULT AND REALITY	36
SINGLE BLESSEDNESS	55
THE CIVIL WAR	68
CONCLUSION	74
CHAPTER TWO: SINGLE WOMEN AND THE SOUTHERN FAMILY	77
THE SOUTHERN FAMILY	78
ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES	84
<i>Family Helpmeet</i>	84
<i>The Maiden Aunt</i>	91
<i>Siblings</i>	106
CONCLUSION	123
CHAPTER THREE: WORK	126
PLANTATION MANAGEMENT	130
NURSING	151
TEACHING	166
CONCLUSION	180
CHAPTER FOUR: FEMALE FRIENDSHIP	182
THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMALE FRIENDSHIP	183
FORM AND FUNCTION OF FEMALE FRIENDSHIP	187
WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH	208
CONCLUSION	214
CHAPTER FIVE: LAW, PROPERTY AND THE SINGLE WOMAN	216
VOLUNTARY SINGLENESS	219
FEMME SOLE VERSUS FEMME COVERT STATUS	237
INVOLUNTARY SINGLENESS	247
CONCLUSION	261
CONCLUSION	267
ABBREVIATIONS	277
BIBLIOGRAPHY	278

Abstract

This thesis examines the lives of single, white, slaveholding women in the nineteenth-century American South from 1830-1870. The central hypothesis is that singleness, in spite of its restrictions, was a route to female autonomy that had its roots in the antebellum era and that was intensified during the Civil War and post-war years. The Civil War acted as a catalyst for accelerating personal, social, economic, and legal changes in single women's lives. It helped to revise and expand traditional gender models by destroying slavery that had tied to the patriarchal structure of the Old South.

Many of the single women discussed in this thesis did not automatically fit into the traditional model of southern womanhood. They were either permanently single, or had married late, were widowed, divorced or separated. Yet they operated their lives within a tight framework of traditional gender conventions that gradually broke down in the antebellum, Civil War and post-war years. Single women clearly understood the importance of adhering to gender conventions. However, they were often able to manipulate them to their advantage, gaining acceptance and respect in southern society that provided an effective springboard to enhance personal autonomy.

In the post-war period these processes continued to gain pace, as female autonomy was heightened by protection tradition ideals about women that could be used to their advantage in seeking a divorce or to gain their due in widowhood. Thus, from conservative ideology sprang radical social change. This thesis provides a wealth of evidence in the form of letters, diaries and court records in support of the central hypothesis that in spite of its restrictions, singleness was a route to greater autonomy for women in the nineteenth-century South.

Acknowledgments

This thesis has developed out of a love for Southern History. It stems from an initial curiosity about the way that southern women's lives were conducted within a framework of race, class and gender in the nineteenth-century South. What began as a passionate interest has slowly, but surely, taken over my life. On this fascinating journey I have accumulated both professional and personal debts.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the David Bruce Centre at Keele University, for their generous financial, academic and personal support throughout my studies. This includes my supervisory team: Dr. Axel Schäfer and Dr. Laura Sandy, for their help, guidance, and support in each stage of the project. I would also like to thank Professor Martin Crawford and Professor Karen Hunt for their early input into the thesis. I am also appreciative to the Peter Parish Memorial Fund (which is part of BrANCH), the Archie Davis Fellowship in North Carolina, the Virginia Historical Society and the Royal Historical Society for the generous travel grants that helped to fund my research trips to North Carolina, Georgia, South Carolina, and Virginia.

Gathering the relevant material on single, slaveholding women has been a momentous task, but it has taken me to several incredible archives in the South. I have mainly worked in six archives, including the Southern Historical Society at the University of North Carolina, the Special Collections at Duke University, the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond, the Georgia Historical Society in Savannah, the South Carolina Historical Society in Charleston, and the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina. In each repository I discovered some excellent collections in addition to helpful and knowledgeable staff. Two individual archivists who deserve a special mention

are Barbara Illie, who shared her extensive knowledge, but also her southern hospitality with me, and Frances Pollard at the Virginia Historical Society.

I have also benefited from attending various conferences, the most memorable of which was a conference held by the Southern Association of Women's Historians at the University of South Carolina in 2009. At this conference I met several leading scholars in southern women's history, who have inspired my work on southern women. These scholars include Anne Firor Scott, Catherine Clinton, Christine Carter and Anya Jabour. The experience of discussing issues such as race, class and gender with these women has profoundly enriched my understanding of the South and of southern women's history.

I have incurred many personal debts in pursuing my thesis. Fellow research students and friends have kindly given their time and energy to read through draft copies of my chapters and to discuss various aspects of the thesis with me. I am extremely grateful to Les Powner and Mary Goode in particular. However, the greatest debt is to my family for supporting, encouraging, and sustaining me on this long journey. To my husband, I owe a very special debt of gratitude. For all of those days that you entertained our three daughters, or for each time you have fixed a computer problem for me, I am so grateful. Also, to my daughters, who have shown an on-going interest in learning more about southern women's lives, and for making me laugh each time they enquired, "how many words have you written today?" Also, to my parents, who have supported me in so many different ways, entertaining the grandchildren but also me, with their words of encouragement throughout the years. Finally, the real inspiration for my work has been the southern ladies who diligently kept a record of their lives in the nineteenth century, and it is their words that resonate throughout the thesis.

Introduction

Grace Elmore Brown was born in 1839, the fourth youngest child in a line of eleven, into a privileged, slaveholding family from South Carolina. As a young lady growing up in the heart of the South in a society in which rigid ideologies of race, class and gender dominated white women's lives, it is illuminating that she wrote with such distaste about the gender conventions forced upon her as a single, white, slaveholding daughter. In September 1864, at the age of twenty-five, she confided in her diary:

I feel like a bird beating against its cage, so hemmed in am I by other people's ideas, and forced by conventionalities to remain where I cannot live up to, or according to my own. It ought to be with the human family as with all other creatures, each one seeks for themselves the life best suited to them.¹

Grace was referring specifically to her family ties and to the expectations placed on her to conform to those nineteenth-century gender conventions that so limited her autonomy. Grace longed for independence and claimed that she had "shocked" her sister with the revelation that "married or not I hoped and trusted I would one day have my own establishment independent of everyone else. Marriage has precious little share in my plans for the future...marriage would hardly be a happy state."²

Grace's comments seem revolutionary for their time and place; she not only rejected marriage but also a future life in which she would have to be dependent on others. She spoke for a new generation of young women, who chafed against the gender conventions placed on them, but also recognised the need to work within their constraints, in order to pursue a life that best suited them. As Grace freely admitted "self is my idol, however, I may disguise it in benevolence, or in doing it for others, self is my first thought."³ Grace

¹ Grace Elmore Brown Diary, 30 September 1864 in Marli F. Weiner (ed.), *A Heritage of Woe: The Civil War Diary of Grace Elmore Brown 1861-1868* (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 1997), xxviii.

² Ibid.

³ Grace Elmore Brown Diary, 28 February 1863, Weiner, *A Heritage of Woe*, 40.

was therefore fully prepared to show a veneer of acceptance, in terms of what was expected of her, as an unmarried southern lady. She was prepared to demonstrate “benevolence” and “usefulness” in her everyday life as a single woman, if it meant that she could work towards having her “own establishment,” which in turn would allow her to exercise a degree of autonomy in terms of her life and the way she chose to live it.

This thesis is a study of single, white, southern women’s lives from 1830–1870. These women were from the slaveholding class and their social position was an important marker that separated them from other women. As members of the slaveholding class they were expected to be paragons of southern femininity, as a result of their elevated racial and class position.⁴ This work explores the way in which these women conducted their lives within a framework of acceptable gender conventions that at times limited them, but that could also be used as a springboard for achieving personal autonomy, particularly during and after the Civil War. These changes often sprung from conservative roots that originated in the antebellum era, but that had been accelerated by the Civil War, which acted as a catalyst for further social change. The central hypothesis in this thesis is that singleness was ultimately a route to female autonomy for slaveholding women in spite of certain restrictions. Many of the single women discussed in this inquiry did not automatically fit into the traditional model of southern womanhood. They were either permanently single, or had married late, were widowed, divorced or separated.⁵ Yet, in spite of their different pathways to female singleness, they all shared in the fact that their

⁴ The slaveholding (or planter class) are defined as planters who owned in excess of twenty slaves. Laura Edwards argues that the planter class accounted for less than 12% of slaveholding households in the pre-Civil War era, with fewer still holding over 100 slaves or more. It was commonplace to hire or own one or two slaves, even in urban areas, where upper-class whites used slaves as house servants. Laura Edwards argues that this included urban slaveholders who also benefited from the social and economic ties to slavery. Slavery supported various family members in different ways, and supported their social status regardless of where they lived. The term “slaveholding” in this study is understood in its broadest possible sense. It refers to large slaveholding families and families who had owned plantations, but who gave them up, or who had turned to other ways to make a living, such as running a family hotel, or a school. Laura Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 16.

⁵ The main focus will be on women who never married.

lives operated within the gender conventions that dominated the South. This framework of analysis helps to view singleness in a much broader light than has been acknowledged in the literature, by trying to understand the ways in which single women's lives were circumscribed by the prevalent ideals of femininity that existed in the antebellum period, up to, and beyond the Civil War. A recent collection of essays analyses singleness from a broad interdisciplinary framework and uses it as a way to understand how society constructs various models of femininity as a means of social control over women.⁶ Singleness can be interpreted in two main ways: as a failure to achieve true womanhood in the way that it is "traditionally endorsed" or, as a sign of autonomy and independence.⁷

This thesis suggests that single women's lives were going through a slow, but definite process of change in the antebellum era, in terms of how their single state was perceived by others, but also in the everyday reality of their lives. This can be demonstrated in the roles and responsibilities they had in the southern family, which helped the cohesiveness of the family unit. Their roles often conformed to traditional models of femininity. It also led to an enhancement of personal autonomy because it required them at times, to step outside of, or beyond, the domestic sphere in preservation of the family. In the Civil War years this process of change intensified as single women's roles expanded more rapidly outside of the family unit and domestic sphere. This was in response to the demands of war that required women to revise their understanding of southern womanhood in order to aid the Confederacy in wartime.

In the antebellum era, slaveholding women managed large plantations in the temporary, or permanent, absence of their husbands. Yet, the Civil War resulted in an unprecedented number of southern women being left alone to manage plantations, or to get involved in wartime work that normally lay beyond their sphere of influence. Hence

⁶ Rudolph M. Bell & Virginia Yans eds., *Women on Their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 3.

⁷ Bell & Yans, *Women on Their Own*, 161.

the war was a catalyst for further social change not only in terms of the destruction of race-based slavery but also in challenging conventional gender roles. Planter women were forced to re-consider how appropriate their gender roles were in the crisis of wartime. Simply put, the quest for southern independence also inadvertently challenged the construction of southern womanhood, at the centre of which stood the southern lady.

Unlike any other social group, the war challenged the elevated racial, class and gender position of the southern lady. As single, slaveholding women expanded their domestic roles by becoming plantation managers, nurses, or teachers the traditional gender conventions of southern society were inadvertently challenged. The Civil War highlighted female singleness in an unprecedented way as many more women became “manless women” or women who were on their own.⁸ In the light of the war, a clearer definition of who was considered to be “single” emerged, as the boundaries between – married and single – became re-defined and elasticised. The war therefore illustrated in a very graphic way how the boundaries between married and single were often fluid, and over the course of a woman’s life it was common for her to traverse several different roles: typically as a southern belle, a plantation wife and mother, and for many, widowhood.

Drew Gilpin Faust argues that the Civil War forced women to re-consider their gender roles in the light of altered circumstances. As many more women were left on their own, as temporarily single women, they were required to re-adjust their roles and responsibilities in order to accommodate the exigencies of wartime. As Faust demonstrates effectively, “war has often introduced women to unaccustomed responsibilities and unprecedented, even if temporary, enhancements of power. War has

⁸ Jennifer Lynn Gross uses the term “manless woman” in her study of Confederate widowhood. Jennifer Lynn Gross, “Good Angels: Confederate Widowhood in Virginia” in *Southern Families At War: Loyalty and Conflict in the Civil War South*, ed. by Catherine Clinton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 137.

been a pre-eminently ‘gendering’ activity, casting thought about sex differences into sharp relief as it has both underlined and realigned gender boundaries.”⁹

In the post-war period the process of change in single women’s roles that began in the antebellum period continued to gain pace. Female autonomy was enhanced by traditional ideals of protection about women that could be used to their advantage in seeking a divorce or to gain their due in widowhood. Thus, from conservative ideology sprang radical social change. My hypothesis is that singleness, in spite of its restrictions, was a route to greater autonomy for women in the nineteenth-century South in the antebellum, Civil War, post-war and Reconstruction era. Singleness, in spite of some social scorn in the early nineteenth-century, gradually became accepted as an alternative model for unmarried women, albeit within a conservative social ethos that continued to try and dictate what their behaviour should be as single women. Often if women showed themselves to conform to the standard, this resulted in greater female autonomy.

As single women’s roles and responsibilities expanded in wartime, they demonstrated that they fitted into a new and developing “Cult of Single Blessedness,” which stated that unmarried women could prove positive contributors to their homes and families, and to society, through benevolence and usefulness to others. The Cult of Single Blessedness developed alongside the Cult of True Womanhood, and came into its own during wartime.¹⁰ It helped to further expand the boundaries of true womanhood, by giving single women the opportunity to prove that they could also be true southern women. It marked a positive step forward in how unmarried women were perceived and treated, as well as providing a platform to self-fulfilment and enhanced personal agency.

⁹ Drew Gilpin Faust, “‘Altars of Sacrifice’: Confederate Women and the Narrative of War,” *The Journal of American History* 76:4 (1990), 1201.

¹⁰ The term “Cult of Single Blessedness” is used by Lee Chamber-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780-1840* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984).

The single women in this study came, for the most part, from privileged families, who had benefited from owning slaves in the antebellum and Civil War era. Even for those women who came from less wealthy slaveholding families, the benefits of slavery were apparent, in terms of the way they lived, with black servants doing the menial and household labour, until the end of the war at least. These women come from the eleven states that made up the Confederacy: Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, North Carolina, Virginia, Florida, Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee and Louisiana. These women often replicated gender hierarchies, or at least showed an outward willingness to accept them in their lives, which raised their public persona and credited them as virtuous, useful and valued members of southern society. A small number of women openly rejected them, but many single women only did so in the privacy of their personal diaries or in letters of correspondence.

Sources

This thesis is based on the letters and diaries of over three hundred, white, native-born, southern women. These women came from planter class families, and as such are reflective of the experience of that particular group. The information on each individual was collected and stored on a basic database as a collective biography. Information recorded included: date of birth / death, place of residence, age, marital status, duration of marriage, number of marriages, her class, type of dwelling, the number of slaves owned. The women in this study were all born between 1810-1860. They were never-married, late-married, widowed, divorced or social widows. Initially, the information on the women in the sample was gained through printed sources, and primary sources available on line. Mining on-line resources, such as DocSouth, initially achieved this. As the research project developed, key repositories were quickly identified which contained

family papers, valuable correspondence (letters) and women's diaries. The main archives utilised during the research process included the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond, the Sally Bingham Research Centre and Special Collections at Duke University, the Georgia Historical Society in Savannah, the South Carolina Historical Society in Charleston and the South Caroliniana at the University of South Carolina.

The main sources used in this thesis are letters and diaries. The journal was a literary genre that enabled women of the slaveholding class an opportunity to express their opinions within the safe confines of a personal diary. Michael O'Brien describes the intimacy of women's diaries over time like a "veil between the self and the world."¹¹ For single, slaveholding women who lived in a society that severely circumscribed their behaviour, the diary represented an outlet through which they were able to "confront power and control."¹² It also provided women relief "from an alienating and narrowly defining real world."¹³

In this context, single women's diaries provide an opportunity for unravelling the complexities of women's lives. They allow the reader to "track the intellectual and emotional independence and life journeys" of women, and to place them within the wider framework of other women's lives. The act of writing itself implies "self-assertion" and it boosted women through difficult times, particularly during the Civil War. Sarah Morgan confides, "Thanks to my liberal supply of pens, ink and paper, how many inexpressibly dreary days I have filled up to my own satisfaction...it has become a necessity to me...just as I am fit for nothing in the world and just before I reach my lowest ebb, I seize my pen,

¹¹ Michael O'Brien, *An Evening When Alone: Four Journals of Single Women in the South, 1827-67* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 3.

¹² Katha Pollit, "Writing a Woman's Life," in *Women's Life Writing*, ed. Carolyn G. Heilbrun (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 15. See also, Cynthia Huff's *Women's Life Writing and Imagined Communities* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

¹³ Huff, *Women's Life Writing*, 1.

dash off half a dozen lines.”¹⁴ Writing in the form of a diary allowed southern women to express their anger, frustration, joy and delight in a genre that gave them a real voice. Amy Wink explains how women tried to maintain their individual sense of self in their writing because it was the thing they had most control over.¹⁵ “Even within the culturally acceptable and restrictive models of appropriate gender identity, individual identity still involves personal interpretation and moments of individual agency within that same framework,” Wink argued.¹⁶ In analysing the language and expressive styles in women’s diaries it is possible to point to historical continuity and changes in the self, in social relations, work and values.

Writing was a luxury for elite women, but it also reflects a certain class and race bias that favoured white, planter class women. They were well-educated, literate women, who left an array of personal correspondence, in the form of letters and diaries, in which they often spoke quite candidly about the realities of their daily lives, and the ways in which they felt constrained or liberated by their status as unmarried women. In their letters women were expected to adhere to certain letter writing conventions that often give a different impression than the personal diaries they left behind. Letters are by their very nature scattered and involve a dialogue between two people. Therefore, it is important to understand the significance of how the writers employed, experimented with, or altered the conventional forms alive in their time. Letter writing therefore provides a useful record of how women embraced or resisted the conventions that they were expected to adhere to.

¹⁴ Charles East, *The Civil War Diary of Sarah Morgan* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1991), 115.

¹⁵ Many southern women placed great value in keeping their personal diaries. Anne Jennings Wise Hobson, a widow from Accomac County in Virginia, confessed, “I cannot do without my journal, it proves a silent monitor and companion to me.” She adds, “I really need something to remind me of the many resolutions I make and break. God’s grace has done wonders for me, yet it if should leave me one moment what would become of me.” Anne Jennings Wise Hobson’s Journal, 11 October 1863, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia (hereafter cited as VHS).

¹⁶ Amy Laura Wink, ‘She Left Nothing In Particular: The Autobiographical Legacy of 19th Century Women’s Diaries,’ (Ph.D. Dissertation, Texas A & M University, 1996), 38.

This thesis has also utilised court records for the final chapter on *Law, Property and the Single Woman*, which was important for assessing how the legal framework aided or abated autonomy in single, slaveholding women in the antebellum, Civil War and Reconstruction eras. It illuminates the key argument regarding the relevance of gender models in the reality of women's lives. The Race and Slavery Petitions Project was a valuable resource which includes civil litigation cases, divorce petitions, inheritance laws, court actions and widow's cases to retrieve their property or dower share, thus revealing the relationship between and single women and the law. The Race and Slavery Petitions Project has also been used to facilitate this research.

The Project was established in 1991 in order to collect and publish "all extant legislative petitions relevant to slavery" as well as county courts records "from the fifteen slaveholding states from the American Revolution to the Civil War."¹⁷ The Project holds almost 3,000 legislative petitions and 14, 512 county court petitions, many of which have been copied onto microfilm with 151-reels in the collection. The Project covers a wide range of subjects, but the most relevant for this study were the divorce petitions, widows petitioning for their dower share (or to be granted permission to move their property, to sell land, or to deal with their minor's slaves). These petitions shine a bright light on single women's lives from an alternative perspective as they reveal the similarities and differences between those women who wanted to become voluntarily single through divorce, and involuntarily singleness, through widowhood.

Organisation

This thesis is organised thematically, rather than chronologically in order to focus on central aspects of single women's lives that reveal patterns of autonomy and constraint.

¹⁷ Race and Slavery Petitions Project
http://library.uncg.edu/slavery_petitions/index.asp

This method makes it possible to construct a more detailed, textured analysis that reflects the complexities of single women's lives in the antebellum, Civil War and Reconstruction era. It is split into five chapters. *Chapter one* sets the scene of what life was like for single women living in the antebellum South with a sharp focus on class, race, and gender. It illuminates the prevalent gender conventions of the Cult of True Womanhood, and explains how it tied to the institutions of race-based slavery that was of particular importance to the slaveholding class.¹⁸ It analyses the relevance of the "feminine ideal" to unmarried women's lives and discusses the ways in which single women tried to forge an identity for themselves in a society that valued marriage and motherhood so highly. Research indicates that attitudes to, and about, single women were already changing in the pre-war period. There is evidence that unmarried women were slowly expanding their roles by showing an adherence to traditional models of femininity, and gradually expanding them outwards. The chapter investigates the influence of the new ideal of companionate marriage but also, the growing awareness of the Cult of Single Blessedness. The focus turns to the Civil War and discusses the extent to which it acted as a catalyst to expedite social changes in single women's lives.

Chapter two considers what a single woman's role was within the family. It examines the nature of the southern family unit and how single women fitted into it, in theory and practice.¹⁹ Elite southern women enjoyed a relative degree of "power and freedom" compared to blacks, and non-slaveholding whites, but they "remained subordinate to men of their own class and race."²⁰ By exploring their place in the southern family it is clear that these women replicated traditional gender roles in some areas of their

¹⁸ Barbara Welter, "Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" *American Quarterly* 18: 2 (1966): 151-174.

¹⁹ Joan E. Cashin, "The Structure of Antebellum Southern Families. 'The Ties that Bound Us Was Strong,'" *Journal of Southern History* 56 (February 1990): 55-70.

²⁰ Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 11.

lives. They demonstrated resistance to the normative roles of marriage and motherhood by remaining single but in other ways they reinforced gender expectations or patterns by duplicating care giving roles as the family helpmeet, the maiden aunt, and in their sibling relationships.

These roles reveal how single, slaveholding women's lives operated within a rigid framework of traditional gender conventions that were particularly marked because of their class and race. These roles in the southern family demonstrated feminine devotion to the same ideals of true womanhood and led inadvertently to an elevated and more privileged position in the family. By upholding the family as central in their lives single, slaveholding daughters, sisters, and cousins carved out a place for themselves in southern society. They helped to revise old notions that single women were redundant women, and by the time of the Civil War, when they were needed in care giving roles outside of the family, they were ready to step-up to the mantel. The Civil War highlighted the extensive contribution of single women, and thus further accelerated the pace of social change in wartime. These temporary changes in wartime became more permanent in the post-war era, as the number of women living alone rose in line with the demographic devastation of war.

It is difficult to estimate the exact number of single women in the South between 1830-1870 due to limitations in the antebellum census records and estimates vary considerably from region to region amongst historians. Michael O'Brien estimates that before 1860 "about a fifth to a quarter of all adult white Southern women were unmarried for life."²¹ However, in a 1848 census of Charleston it is known "exactly half of all adult white female Charlestonians were married, almost a third were single, and a fifth were

²¹ Michael O'Brien, *An Evening When Alone: Four Journals of Single Women in the South 1827-67* (Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 2.

widowed.”²² In an earlier estimate based on 750 members of the planter elite born between 1765-1815, Catherine Clinton found only 2.1% of women never-marrying.²³ Finally, the number of unwed, native-born women, across the entire US as a whole, is estimated at around 7.3% in the 1830s.²⁴ From these figures alone, particularly with reference to the estimates based on Charleston and the South as a whole, it is clear that the number of single, white females was a significant issue that requires further investigation and explanation.

Chapter three focuses on the internal and external divisions of work. This section explores the role of single slaveholding women – often widows – who managed plantations, or who filled other traditional working roles as teachers and nurses. It draws attention to patterns of work that took root in the antebellum period, and the reasons that resulted in them adopting internal or external working roles. In the Old South widows managed large plantations in the absence of a male and in doing so confronted certain challenges but also enjoyed opportunities for self-advancement. Single women were already starting to embrace the ideal of single blessedness in the antebellum period. During the Civil War the necessity for single women to fulfil the calling of single blessedness intensified, and women used the exigencies of war as a reason to expand their domestic roles in the family onto a more public stage as nurses on the front line. They also worked as teachers both inside and outside of the domestic setting, and in doing so they expanded the internal and external divisions of work.

The Civil War led to the development of new opportunities for women. It challenged old notions of female dependency and male protection. It also confronted the idea that women were physically weak and timid in nature. As widows and spinsters responded to

²² Ibid., 1 & 2.

²³ Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 232.

²⁴ Lee Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780-1840* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 3.

the demands for help in wartime, they faced difficult and testing situations that they often overcame. They stepped up to the challenge of wartime work, as nurses in Confederate hospitals and in caring for men who were strangers to them. They overcame the initial prejudice of others for taking up ‘unladylike’ occupations, which fell outside of the internal divisions of the southern family, but eventually drew strength and praise from their valiant actions. In the post-war era single women had further carved out a place for themselves in the public world of work, and the temporary changes of war often became more permanent.²⁵ The war also had a devastating effect on class, as it literally wiped out the livelihoods of some planter class families. With the loss of their slaves, families were left in financial ruin, a blow from which they never fully recovered.²⁶

Chapter four analyses the nature of female friendship in the antebellum, Civil War and post-war South. It argues that single women benefited from considerable freedom in their same-sex friendships in the antebellum era, for the very reason that these friendships were perceived as temporary, and had no possibility of becoming more permanent. They were fixed within the overarching framework of traditional gender roles that perceived women as non-sexual and thus, non-threatening to the conservative status quo. Female friendships therefore reflect the dominant gender ideologies of the nineteenth-century on the surface at least. For within these same-sex friendships lay a culture of resistance to marriage and motherhood, which actually challenged prevalent gender models.²⁷ The form and function of female friendship was often complex and depended on where women

²⁵ Jennifer Lynn Gross, “ ‘Lonely Lives are not Necessarily Joyless’: Augusta Jane Evan’s *Macaria* and the Creation of a Place for Single Womanhood in the Postwar South”, *American Nineteenth Century History* 2:1 Spring (2001): 33-52.

²⁶ Mary Ker Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina (hereafter cited as SHC).

²⁷ Anya Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) & Anya Jabour, *Female Families and Friendship in the Old South* (University of Florida Press: Tampa, 2009).

lived, whom they lived with, and at what stage of their lives they were at.²⁸ Romantic friendships were considered a natural part of girlhood, conducted in boarding schools or through letters of correspondence to one another, almost as a precursor to marriage. They were seen as temporary in nature and, as a result harmless.

In the post-war period, attitudes to female friendships began to alter. As female friendship between non-married women threatened to become more permanent due to social, economic, and demographic changes brought by war, the view of them changed. The post-war conservative ethos saw women as sexual, rather than non-sexual beings, and started to interpret same-sex friendship as a threat, and possibly subservient.²⁹ Research in this chapter reflects these changes in women's lives and discusses the way that this was translated in their growing personal autonomy and the way in which southern conservatism reacted to it in the post-war years.

Finally, *Chapter five* analyses how the southern legal system was also motivated by an ethos of patriarchal control that only extended its protection to the most deserving southern women, who were defined by the courts as upper-class women who clearly demonstrated that they were true women in their behaviour and conduct. In marriage, these women must show that they had been innocent victims of their husbands' abuse and be able to substantiate their claim with evidence. Married women who voluntarily sought a divorce from their husbands were at the mercy of the courts and therefore they were reliant on them to grant them dissolution of marriage and a return to their status as femme

²⁸ Carroll Smith Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1:1 (1975): 1-29.

²⁹ Nancy Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," *Signs: Journal of Woman and Culture and Society* 4:2 (1978); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Women and her role in Nineteenth Century America," *Journal of American History* 60 (1973/74).

sole. Success or failure hinged on them being able to prove that they had upheld the tenets of true womanhood in marriage.³⁰

This chapter also argues that slaveholding widows were dependent on the courts' discretion in any disputes concerning the dower share they received after their husbands' death. The return to a widow's femme sole status was often fraught with difficulties. A widow must demonstrate her 'ladyhood' (in upholding her class, race, and gender role) but also had to possess determination and grit in order to survive as a woman alone. In the antebellum period legal changes were already in effect, in that the Married Women's Property Acts, particularly in 1848, had inadvertently provided single women with some power. The property acts were the product of conservative concerns regarding men's property in difficult economic times but resulted in significant legal changes in single women's lives.

Literature Review

This thesis builds on the rich and exciting literature on southern womanhood that began with Anne Firor Scott's *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics* in 1970.³¹ Her analysis focused on the plantation mistress, which set a standard for much of the work that followed.³² As Michael O'Brien points out, "the study of antebellum southern women

³⁰ Donna Elizabeth Sedevia, "The Prospect of Happiness: Women, Divorce and Property in the Mississippi Territory, 1798-1817," *Journal of Mississippi History* LV11: 3 (1995): 189-207; Suzanne Lebsack, "Radical Reconstruction and the Property Rights of Southern Women," *The Journal of Southern History* 43:2 (1977): 195-216.

³¹ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

³² The vast literature on the plantation mistress includes: Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Works in The Southern Colonies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938); Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in The Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988); *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family and, Marriage in the Victorian South* edited by Carol Bleser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Jane Turner Censer,

has concentrated on the married.... at the centre of our understanding has grown to be the plantation mistress. We have been offered varying versions of her, but her centrality has been assumed.”³³ Even Scott admitted in her twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *The Southern Lady* “the proportion of women who never married seems to have grown as the 19th Century went on. Taken together, spinsters and widows made up a significant percentage of antebellum southern women, but so far no one has payed them much mind.”³⁴

Likewise Catherine Clinton gave a rather negative impression of unmarried women in her study of the plantation mistress. She focused very little attention on the figure of the single, southern lady other than to say that she was expected to “repress personal wishes that would interfere with family duty,” and that she must devote her time and energies to other women’s families if a nurse or extra pair of hands were required.”³⁵ Her description concurs with Michael O’Brien’s when he spoke of the single, southern woman as being tangential to the domestic world. As he observed, “above all, she was not a mother, even though she might be surrounded by children. So she stood a little aside, acquiring thereby the advantages of a double vision, of being in, but not of the domestic world.”³⁶

Yet, unmarried women from the elite classes were seldom marginal, shadowy creatures within the family unit, they were valued for their contribution and services to the

North Carolina Planters and Their Children 1800–1860 (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984) Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830–1900* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Bertram Wyatt Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behaviour in the Old South* (Oxford University Press: New York and Oxford, 1982); Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York, 1995); Sally G. McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White Women in the Old South*, (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlon Davidson, Inc., 1992).

³³ Michael O’Brien, *An Evening When Alone: Four Journals of Single Women in the South 1827–67* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 1.

³⁴ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830–1930* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia: Reprinted, 1995), 283.

³⁵ Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 6.

³⁶ O’Brien, *An Evening When Alone*, 3.

family, and during the war and the post-war period they were often integral to it. Single, southern women cared deeply for their families and wanted to show that they were valuable members of the body politic. Yet, these women, particularly in the later Civil War period, were also increasingly active outside of the family unit, often driven by economic need or by their own desires to widen their sphere. Jennifer Lynn Gross suggests that the spinster in many ways played the same role as married women but beyond the nuclear family, which in turn gave her independence and autonomy in limited measure. Single women acting as nurses and teachers were acting out “mother” to the nation.³⁷

Lee Chambers-Schiller’s work on single women in the American Northeast stood alone as the most extensive full-length study of single blessedness in America drawing attention, and raising awareness to a small, independent group of nineteenth-century spinsters in the American Northeast.³⁸ Chambers-Schiller argues that “a new affirmation of singlehood, a Cult of Single Blessedness developed in America in parallel to the Cult of Domesticity,” and she exposed the inter-relationship between them.³⁹ In her description of marriage versus singleness, based on the ideal of companionate marriage, Schiller concluded that, “since marriage was to be based on “undying, changeless affection” rather

³⁷ Jennifer Lynn Gross, “‘Lonely Lives are not Necessarily Joyless’: Augusta Jane Evans’s *Macaria* and the Creation of a Place for Single Womanhood in the Postwar South,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 2:1 (Spring 2001): 33-52. Gross also wrote about Confederate widowhood in the post-war era. See also, Jennifer Lynn Gross, “‘And for the Widow and Orphan’: Confederate Widows, Poverty and Public Assistance,” in *Inside the Confederate Nation* ed. Lesley J. Gordon & John C. Inscoe (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press): 209-229.

³⁸ Lee Chamber-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780-1840* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984). Since Schiller, other important work has emerged on single women: Zsuzsa Berend, “Cultural and Social Sources of Spinsterhood in Nineteenth-Century New England,” (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1994); Bridget Hill. *Women Alone: Spinsters in England 1660-1850* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2001); Amy Froide. *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005); Jenea Tallentire, “‘Everyday Athena’s’: Strategies of Survival and Identity for Ever-Single Women in British Columbia, 1880-1930” (PhD dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2006); Christine Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness: Unmarried Women in the Urban South 1800-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Rudolf Bell & Virginia Yans (ed), *Women on Their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

³⁹ Laura Thatcher Ulrich Review of “*Liberty a Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780-1840*” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 72. No.1. (June 1985), 140.

than on convenience, it was better to remain single than to accept anything less than a true marriage.”⁴⁰ Schiller argues that family emerged at the centre of the Cult of Single Blessedness, but the family also held women back, and constrained them, preventing them from fulfilling all of their personal goals. Another important element of her argument was that northern women were primarily motivated by the desire for economic security, as well as a desire to expand intellectual horizons.

A decade later, Zsuzsa Berend revisited the idea of single blessedness in the context of the nineteenth-century Northeast, and highlighted an “ethic of worldly usefulness” as opposed to economic gain as the chief motivation in women’s quest for single blessedness.⁴¹ Schiller highlighted that a similar opening for single blessedness occurred much later on in the South for women born between 1840-1850, who therefore came of age in wartime, and who would have benefited from the opening of new opportunities that came with war, which is echoed in my work.⁴²

Christine Carter discusses the importance of family in her full-length study of *southern* single blessedness that focused on the experiences of unmarried women in urban areas. She argues that what made southern single blessedness unique from the American Northeast, was the fact that elite, white women were not motivated by economic need or by the need for personal autonomy, but instead by a desire to find a place for themselves within the family. Since they were already well supported by their privileged, well-to-do families, Carter says that they simply did not need to work.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Zsuzsa Berend, “Cultural and Social Sources of Spinsterhood in Nineteenth-Century New England,” (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1994).

⁴² Lee Chamber-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780-1840* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 22-28. More recently scholars have explored how the Cult of Single Blessedness affected unmarried in wartime & in the post-war era: in Drew Gilpin Faust’s, “Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War,” in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, ed. Catherine Clinton & Nina Sibley (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) & Jennifer Lynn Gross’s, “‘Lonely Lives are not Necessarily Joyless’: Augusta Jane Evans’s *Macaria* and the Creation of a Place for Single Womanhood in the Postwar South,” *American Nineteenth Century History* Vol.2:1 (2001): 33-52.

However, Carter's study concludes in 1865, and it could be argued that in fact, there is much evidence to suggest that single women, particularly those who had once lived on large plantations supported by slavery, were later motivated by fiscal gain. This came into sharper focus in the post-Civil War world, when previously wealthy slaveholding or elite families, became what was known as the "genteel poor," because of ruined land and the loss of slaves. Therefore, southern women could clearly be driven by economic motives. Elite women also saw the personal fulfilment that could be gained from work and economic remuneration that led to an increased desire for personal agency.⁴³ This viewpoint differs from Carter's findings that single, white, elite women from the urban centres of Charleston and Savannah from 1800-1865 were largely satisfied with their roles within the southern family and did not seek to expand them. Carter argues that rather than seeking autonomy, these unmarried women saw themselves as existing within the mainstream of southern womanhood, rather than outside of it.

This thesis highlights how single women operated within a framework of traditional gender conventions but in fact often used it as a springboard to enhance their personal autonomy. Anya Jabour's work on young women in the South describes "a culture of resistance" in youth. For example, young girls deliberately delayed marriage by extending the length of time they spent at boarding school. If they had agreed to marriage already, they might make the courtship as long as possible.⁴⁴ Some of the women in this study clearly exhibited a "culture of resistance" by marrying late. However, research suggests that a significant minority of single women did more than resist cultural pressures to marry; they rejected it altogether. Some women did this by developing a "culture of

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of South Carolina Press), 10. For a discussion of single blessedness also see, 83-111 & 270-277. Jabour's work builds on Joan Cashin's work that suggests that elite women had a "culture of resignation", in that they did not resigned themselves to the fact that they had little choice except to silently endure the gender conventions that they dominated their world.

compliance” in that they showed a veneer of acceptance, but only as a platform for enhanced personal agency. Anya Jabour also explores the topic of same-sex families in the nineteenth-century South, and the way in which some unmarried women deliberately sought alternative living arrangements in which they set up home with other female friends.⁴⁵ Her work highlights the importance of same-sex friendships in the nineteenth-century South and how definitions of female sexuality gave women the opportunity to enjoy passionate same-sex friendships because of the nineteenth-century notion that women were passionless or asexual. It builds on a body of literature that has grown out of the debate on the existence of a women’s culture.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues that the severe social restrictions placed on men and women, imposed by the ideology of separate spheres led to the development of a distinctive female culture that heightened intimacy between women. Rosenberg, who mostly focused on the North, interpreted it as a positive development that gave rise to an autonomous homosocial world bound together by kinship networks and shared experiences that can be seen in the same-sex friendships between unmarried women in this study.⁴⁶ Ellen DuBois challenges Carroll Smith Rosenberg’s interpretation of the emergence of a distinctive female culture and criticised the romantic portrayal of female domesticity as evidence of autonomy. She argues that nineteenth-century women have been “ignored in favour of their images,” which makes it difficult to understand the real lives of nineteenth-century women. Far from seeing the development of a distinctive female culture, and with it female friendship as a sign of liberation, she argues that there is no evidence of any “radical break from dominant sexual ideology any more than slave

⁴⁵ Anya Jabour, “Female Families: Same Sex families in the Victorian South,” in Craig Thompson Friend & Anya Jabour, *Family Values in the Old South* (Tampa: University of Florida Press, 2009): 86-103.

⁴⁶ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1:1 (1975): 1-29. Similarly, Nancy Cott’s “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850,” *Signs: Journal of Woman and Culture and Society* 4:2 (1978): 219-236. Cott interpreted women’s culture as an opportunity for increased female identity.

culture dominated slavery.”⁴⁷ Clinton, Friedman and Fox-Genovese also questioned if female culture existed at all and more recent studies describe a complex culture that existed in the South.⁴⁸

Suzanne Lebsock supports the women’s culture debate raised by Rosenberg and identifies the development of a distinctive female culture in antebellum Virginia as a sign of autonomy. She examines the way that women in Petersburg, Virginia dealt with property rights, the provision of wills and financial affairs in comparison to men to demonstrate this.⁴⁹ Her findings reveal how single women – widows and spinsters – frequently made independent choices regarding marriage, work and property, which reveal female agency. In contrast to the negative image of the ‘redundant’ single woman dependent on the charity of her brother’s household, Lebsock describes resourceful, independent, and strong- minded single women who shared the same property rights as men.

Through the acquisition of separate estates, becoming executors or administrators of their deceased husbands’ estates, in addition to their specifically female manner of writing wills, Lebsock ably demonstrates the way in which a distinctive female-centred world existed in Petersburg. Likewise, Lebsock shows how single women appeared to operate in different ways to men in their financial dealings. Personalism, “a tendency to respond to the particular needs and merits of individuals” hallmarked single women’s actions and

⁴⁷ For more on this debate refer to Ellen Dubois, “*Politics and Culture in Women’s History: A Symposium*,” in Sue Morgan et al., *The Feminist History Reader* (New York: Routledge: 2006), 88.

⁴⁸ Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in The Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982) Jean Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985) and Elizabeth Fox- Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina, 1988) all question the existence of a distinctive women’s culture. For example, Clinton suggests that even women who fought against restrictions were limited by paternalism that forbade them to operate independent administration of plantations. She emphasises women’s isolation, “Every woman was an island... isolated unto herself,” 179. She argues that a woman’s dependence (married or otherwise) on her family lasted a lifetime. Lastly, she postulates that the South offered no alternative role for unmarried daughters, to which I disagree.

⁴⁹ Suzanne Lebsock, *The Freewomen of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town 1784-1860* (W.W.Norton and Company: New York and London, 1984): 112-145.

separated them from men's.⁵⁰ Women tended to pick and choose from amongst their potential heirs, in a way that men generally did not, with mothers favouring daughters when granting separate estates and placing "a particular women's need for economic security above the principle of male dominance in the family," which again highlighted female autonomy within the limitations of the pre-existing gender hierarchies.⁵¹

Women were willing to operate according to their own standards, which sat uncomfortably with southern paternalism and the image of the submissive lady. Lebsack has clearly shown that widows and spinsters in Petersburg functioned outside of their traditional boundaries as women, but also that their actions were accepted because of the way in which they did it, such as acting on behalf of their deceased husbands, which resonates with much of the evidence in this study. For example, if widows operated large plantations after their husbands' death, and even if they wielded considerable economic and social power over others because of it, they were also accepted as only acting on behalf of their deceased husbands, rather than seeking self-advancement.⁵² Elsewhere, Martha Vicinus's investigations into single women's lives highlighted the growth in agency in single women in Britain.⁵³ Amy Froide also explored the reasons why women

⁵⁰ Suzanne Lebsack, *The Freewomen of Petersburg*, xix.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid. For a further discussion on the existence of a distinctive women's culture see, Joan Cashin's, "Decidedly Opposed to the Union: Women's Culture, Marriage, and Politics in Antebellum South Carolina," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 78, 4 (Winter 1994): 735-759 who highlights the formation of close personal ties shared between elite, southern women in an urban setting. Christine Jacobsen Carter, echoes her argument in, *Southern Single Blessedness: Unmarried Women in the Urban South 1800-1865* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press: 2006) but with a focus on never-married women in urban centres such as Savannah and Charleston. Refer to Chapter 4, "'To Know That You Still Love Me': Female Friends and Female Friendships." More recently Anya Jabour has examined the formation of same sex families in the Victorian South. Anya Jabour, *Female Families and Friendship in the Old South* (Tampa: University of Florida Press, 2009), 86-103. Jabour argues that whilst same sex friendship in the South may have represented a temporary "escape from patriarchal power, household responsibilities, and constant childbearing," they could offer a permanent alternative to married life. The intimate relationships between women, that had been made possible because of the rigid gender restrictions placed upon them, also acted as a barrier that prevented them from making them a permanent fixture. For example, Jabour talks specifically about the desire of some women to set up home with one another, but also shows that it was a dream that could not be realised, because their relationships remained heavily circumscribed.

⁵³ Other scholars who have written on the topic of female friendship include: Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women From the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), esp. 145-204; Melinda S. Buza, "'Pledges of Our Love': Friendship, Love and

did not marry in Early Modern England though they were not motivated by single blessedness per se. By investigating marital status as a category of difference and examining the family history of never-married women and singlewomen in the urban economy, Froide challenged the negative stereotypes attached to spinsters, which again helped to improve the perception of never-married women.⁵⁴

Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease made similar comparisons between widowhood and never-married women. Their analysis starts to move closer to the broader framework of this study in their analysis of a wider group of women who were either voluntarily or involuntarily single (widowhood). Their work revealed the extent of the neglect of single white women by historians of the South, and argued convincingly that “a history of women that concerns itself primarily with wives not only overlooks the third of all women who had never married but also blurs significant differences inherent in the adult life cycle – ignoring half of all women in their twenties and more than half of those over fifty-five.”⁵⁵

Although it was a comparison of the North and South, Pease and Pease underlined a different approach to studying gender through the sub-category of singleness. It is not any great surprise to learn that if a woman was born in the South, she was more than likely to spend a considerable portion of her life as a single woman. Marrying at a young age to men much older than them meant “even in their early thirties [Charleston women] were 20 percent more likely to be widows than their Boston sisters [in the North].”⁵⁶ Even in the period before the Civil War, Charlestonian women had a twenty percent higher chance of

Marriage among the Virginia Gentry, 1800-1825,” in eds. Edward Ayers and John Willis, *The Edge of the South: Life in Nineteenth Century Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991); Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15:3 (2003); John Howard ed., *Carryin on in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

⁵⁴ Amy M. Froide *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005), 218.

⁵⁵ Jane H Pease & William H Pease, *Ladies, Women and Wenches: Choice and Constraint in Antebellum Charleston and Boston* (The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1990), 11.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

becoming widows in their thirties, which meant that a significant proportion of them could go on to live as single women, or women without husbands for the majority of their adult lives.⁵⁷ This is a critical point that dovetails with this study, because it raises the question of what was the difference in attitude and lived experience for widows who were single compared to women who never-married at all. Was the fact that they *had* at some point been married enough to grant them a lifelong status as “true women”?

Kirsten Wood’s study of slaveholding widows in the American Southeast demonstrates how important the perceptions of femininity were to the exercise of widow’s agency. If widows were seen to act in the interest of their deceased husbands, and to uphold certain standards of feminine behaviour, they benefited from a considerable degree of personal autonomy.⁵⁸ As Wood suggests wealthy widows utilised their elevated position within the social hierarchy to re-exert their ladyhood, which gilded them with an air of superiority that never-married women tried to emulate in the role of single blessedness.⁵⁹ There are many similarities that can be drawn between wealthy widows, and the well-to-do spinsters that feature in this thesis. Simply put, a combination of wealth, class, and single status could overcome the difficulties that came with their gender, if they were prepared to show a willingness to adhere to the broader conventions of southern womanhood, which remained in place until after the Civil War.

Slaveholding widows were considered to be proper ladies by the people who surrounded them, almost akin to a mythical status that remained with them even after their husband’s death. It was something that they played on, emphasised and exaggerated, in an effort to provide them with the protective cushioning necessary when dealing with their slaves, property and family after their husband had died. This can be seen in many of the

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Kirsten Wood, *Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 158-191.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 9-10.

petitions used in the final chapter of this thesis. As Wood notes: “Widows evicted tenants, fired overseers, and sold slaves, all in the name of obeying (dead) husbands and protecting [their] children.” Likewise their “posture of dependent ladyhood...encouraged white men to decide that assisting a widow served their own financial interests, familial honour, or personal reputation for chivalry,” which replicated existing gender patterns.⁶⁰ If an elite, southern woman couched her demands in the language of dependence, and in the service of the family, she soon discovered that she inadvertently gained personal agency.

Contained within the literature on singleness per se exists a far more vibrant literature on the various *categories* of single women that fall within this study. For example, there is separate literature on divorce, non-marriage and widowhood. Divorce is a burgeoning field of historical inquiry but the main arguments that have helped formulate ideas for this paper come from Jane Turner Censer and Victoria Bynum. Censer examined divorce statutes and divorces in the South. She concluded that the South saw a “gradual and continual liberalization in the granting of divorces in the nineteenth century,” which is in spite of Victoria Bynum’s findings that divorce in North Carolina favoured men in the post-bellum period.⁶¹ Evidence in this study points to the fact that there was a gradual liberalisation of divorce laws in the South, but that these were often irregular and patchy and varied from state to state. These changes were usually the by-product of southern conservatism that wanted to protect women, rather than liberate them, but nonetheless the overall impact was the same, that it led to a broadening of the divorce laws that freed women from abusive marriages.⁶²

⁶⁰ Kirsten Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War* (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 2004), 10.

⁶¹ Victoria Bynum, “Reshaping the Bonds of Womanhood: Divorce in Reconstruction North Carolina,” in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 320-335.

⁶² Jane Turner Censer, “‘Smiling Through Her Tears,’ Antebellum Southern Women and Divorce,” *American Journal of Legal History*, 25 (January 1981): 24-47.

Lawrence Goodheart, Neil Hanks and Elizabeth Johnson develop Censer's argument further by revealing how the newer frontier states adopted more liberal laws on divorce than many of the more established, older southern states. This corresponds with the findings in this study that highlights how gender conventions were shaped by a different set of geographical, economic and cultural boundaries depending upon where a woman lived. Texas bore out this claim by adopting one of the most liberal divorce laws in the country at the time it was passed in 1841. The expansion of the divorce laws in Texas may well have been out of sympathy for victimised women, but the net result, as some historians have argued, was that it led to a whole generation of more independent women – socially, legally and economically, a point verified by this study.⁶³

An excellent essay on divorce is Victoria Bynum's *Re-shaping the Bonds of Womanhood: Divorce in Reconstruction North Carolina*, which analyses the family in relation to public institutions of power showing that in North Carolina, the divorce laws were unfavourably construed towards men in the post-war period. This was because women's roles were still very much seen as integral to the 'family' as opposed to individuals with their own legal identity. In legal terms that translated into the fact that southern men were granted more power when it came petitioning for divorce than women. This meant that in North Carolina at least, the post-bellum period was more stringent on women than in the antebellum era, perhaps as a way to establish a new order in the Reconstruction era.⁶⁴ This may well have been true, but as this thesis shows slaveholding women were in a unique position to reassert their moral authority as southern ladies and manipulate the system to their best advantage.

⁶³ Angela Boswell, "“Separate and Apart”: Women's Public Lives in a Rural Southern County, 1837-1873" (PhD dissertation, Rice University, 1998), 14 & Francelle Blum, "When Marriages Fail: Divorce in Nineteenth-Century Texas" (PhD diss., Rice University, 2008).

⁶⁴ Victoria Bynum, "Reshaping the Bonds of Womanhood: Divorce in Reconstruction North Carolina," in *Divided Houses: Gender and The Civil War*, ed. Catherine Clinton & Nina Sibley (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992): 320-333.

A good discussion of deviant behaviour – divorce and singleness– among antebellum women and white men’s use of the state to control and punish such behaviour is offered by Victoria Bynum *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*.⁶⁵ Bynum explored women who lived outside of their designated zone or sphere. She discussed how marriage enabled middle and upper-class white women with “the essential means [to] fulfil their societal role” but she highlights how many other women were not protected by it. Poor white women, who remained single beyond the age of thirty, were subject to different types of pressure than their wealthier counterparts. “With personal reputation less of a concern than earning a living, fewer poorer white women who lived outside the bonds of marriage remained celibate or tucked away in the homes of relatives,” because of their need to provide for themselves, but unlike wealthier women, they were not protected by their ladylike status, since they never had it in the first place.⁶⁶ This interface between gender and class is well highlighted in Bynum’s study of unruly women and, again, indicates fertile ground for future research.⁶⁷

Scholars of widowhood have stressed how widows faced the challenge of constructing new identities as single women following the loss of their husbands. Chagsin Lee, working on widowhood in Northern Kentucky, 1862-1900, described the difficulties women endured as widowhood stripped them of their status, roles and identity as married women.⁶⁸ The ‘powerless institution’ that Lee described for soldiers widows on the Union side, hinged on the social prescription that widowhood was a negative identity. To say ‘I’m a widow’ in the North, elicited only pity from others, and according to Lee, “widows

⁶⁵ Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992).

⁶⁶ Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 46.

⁶⁷ Women and politics is another key area that has been opened up by Elizabeth Varon’s work on women in antebellum Virginia, *We Mean To Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁶⁸ Chagsin Lee, “Beyond Sorrowful pride: Civil War Pensions and War Widowhood, 1862-1900” (PhD diss., The College of Arts and Sciences, Ohio University, 1997), 87.

were expected to live up to an image [of virtuous widowhood]” that fell in line with nineteenth-century conventions of the ‘grieving widow.’⁶⁹ Again, the idea of widows being expected to adhere to certain feminine ideals and stereotypes are key areas that will be explored in relation to single women in this thesis. As highlighted by Lee’s analysis of widows in the North, the status of widowhood also placed constraints on women, as these women without husbands were expected to live up to an image of virtuous widowhood, inextricably bound to the ‘Cult of True Womanhood.’ Deviation from this image was not countenanced by society and therefore widows were forced to operate within these tight constraints and to manipulate and use them as best they could in order to exercise a sense of agency.⁷⁰

Lee’s widows in the North were ‘soldiers’ widows’ with little or no money and a matching social standing. In contrast, Kirsten Wood’s *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows From The American Revolution through the Civil War* represented a very different class of widow – white, slaveholding widows across Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century.⁷¹ The widows that Lee describes in the North and the wealthy plantation class widows of Wood’s investigation fall at opposite ends of the social spectrum. As Wood notes in her introduction, widowhood left “most women socially marginal and even destitute,” in the period following the American Revolution and through the Civil War, in large part due to the economic difficulties encountered by lower class widows.⁷² However, for slaveholding widows, cast in a safety net of relative wealth, the experience of widowhood could be quite different and often was, depending upon where they lived and what wealth they hung on to, which linked to the terms of their husbands’ wills. These women, whilst in a small minority, at times

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Kirsten. E. Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁷² Wood, *Masterful Women*, Introduction.

managed to hold on to their wealth, property and social position – and with it their autonomy. As wealthy widows, these women were respected and averred as they utilised their elevated position within the social hierarchy to re-exert both ladyhood and power, which gilded them with an air of superiority unparalleled by women from lower social classes. Their class standing afforded them protection from public criticism and sheltered them, in many cases, from having to demean themselves in looking for work outside of plantation management, though this was not the case for all.

Wood highlights the ongoing debate concerning female agency in the South and reveals the interplay between class, gender, patriarchy, slavery and paternalism. Slaveholding widows in the American southeast emphasised their status as women who had married in order to project an image of “virtuous widowhood.” At the same time, these women adopted a dual identity – merging their identities as virtuous widows and masterful women in an impressive display of female agency. Put another way, slaveholding widows projected an image of subservient widowhood in keeping with southern gender prescriptions. Yet these women also exhibited considerable levels of personal autonomy (or power) by acting the masterful role on behalf of their deceased husbands. Wood’s study of the slaveholding elite comes closest to the themes of constraint and agency discussed in this thesis, though Wood examines widowhood in isolation to other marital statuses.

Jennifer Lynn Gross suggests in *“Good Angels”: Confederate Widowhood in Virginia*, that a woman’s decision to remarry generally reflected “a tangled component of need, opportunity and desire.”⁷³ In contrast to Lebsack’s findings in Petersburg, Virginia, in the pre-war period, which showed that the poorest widows re-married in order to escape poverty, the same was not true in the case of Virginia’s Civil War widows, who had even

⁷³ Jennifer Lynn Gross, ‘Good Angels: Confederate Widowhood in Virginia’ in *Southern Families At War: Loyalty and Conflict in the Civil War South*, ed. Catherine Clinton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 137.

this option taken from them.⁷⁴ Gross suggests that because of the demographic imbalance generated by war, with far fewer men available to marry, it meant that even the traditional route of re-marriage in order to escape poverty was shut off to many southern widows in the post-war years. However, in Virginia law single women, including widows, were defined as *femme soles* (women on their own) and in theory they possessed all the same legal privileges as men which meant that “they could enter into contracts, bring lawsuits against debtors, sell or convey property by deed and plan for the distribution of their property by executing wills,” which theoretically channelled an alternative source of autonomy into their hands.⁷⁵

The short and long-term impact of the Civil War on southern women’s lives continues to be debated. Scholars such as George Rable, Drew Gilpin Faust, Suzanne Lebsock, and Lee Ann Whites dispute Anne Scott’s early findings that the war permanently altered women’s roles and responsibilities.⁷⁶ Whilst they agree with Scott that the war altered gender roles, they do not agree that the transformations were permanent.⁷⁷ George Rable agrees that there were changes in women’s lives in the Civil

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 139.

⁷⁶ Suzanne Lebsock, *The Freewomen of Petersburg; Status and Culture in a Southern Town* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984); Jean. E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985) George Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and The Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (University of Illinois, 1989); Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1996) and Lee Ann Whites, *The Civil War As a Crisis in Gender; Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

⁷⁷ Joan Cashin, “‘Since the War Broke Out’: The Marriage of Kate and William McClure,” in Clinton and Sibley, *Divided Houses*: 200-212; and Drew Faust, “Southern Stories: Slaveholders in Peace and War” (Columbia: 1992): 174-192. For more on women’s wartime roles also see: Drew Gilpin Faust, “Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War,” in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, ed. Catherine Clinton & Nina Sibley (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992): 171-200; *A Woman’s War: Southern Women in the Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy*, ed. Edward D. C. Campbell & Kym S. Rice (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996): 1-27. There are also several important monographs that have been written on individual women’s wartime roles. These include: Marli Weiner ed., *A Heritage of Woe: The Civil War Diary of Grace Elmore Brown 1861-1868* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997); Phoebe Yates Pember, *A Southern Woman’s Story: Life in Confederate Richmond*, ed. Bell. I. Wiley (Marietta, Georgia: McCowat-Mercer Press, 1954); Jean V. Berlin, ed., *A Confederate Nurse: The Diary of Ada W. Bacot, 1860-1863*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994); Kate Cumming, *A Journal of Hospital Life in the Confederate Army of Tennessee: from the Battle of Shiloh to the End of the War* (Louisville: John P. Morgan & Co.; New Orleans: W. Evelyn, c. 1866).

War period, but he concluded that in the aftermath of war and Reconstruction white women's lives quickly returned to previously held notions of domesticity coupled with the Lost Cause mythology. Rable argues that women effectively surrendered any temporary gains in wartime in support of an unstable nation.⁷⁸ For privileged white women who relied on slavery to elevate their class position, the collapse in the slave system at the end of the war expedites the rate of social changes in single women's lives by breaking down gender conventions.

As this study will show, the war acted as a catalyst to boost liberal attitudes and ideas that some women held. As one young woman noted, when her parents tried to dissuade her from going to work as a teacher, "I will not be a dependant old maid at home with an allowance doled out to me when I could be made comfortable by my own exertions."⁷⁹ Young women, like Elizabeth Grimball, increasingly realised that alternative models of life and femininity existed on which they could base their lives. Hers was a self-conscious realization that she had some control over her own destiny, and that the war had not only placed new demands on women's shoulders, but also, created new opportunities that would allow them to re-shape gender roles both inside and outside of marriage, which correlated to the Cult of Single Blessedness. She was one of many single, southern women who disproved the hypothesis that women returned to traditional gender roles once the war ended.

Drew Gilpin Faust similarly argues that the Civil War had "ripped apart" the Old South's basis for gender relations that hinged on the institution of slavery and also women's place within it. As southern men failed in their masculine endeavour to protect home and family, and as the South met with defeat in the war, the whole construction of

⁷⁸ George Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

⁷⁹ Laura Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live her Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

gender relations in the South wobbled and the patriarchal system showed clear signs of straining. In this context, the onus was placed on southern women abandoning their new roles and liberties and returning to their traditional roles and to help redress this imbalance caused by war. Joan Cashin, Catherine Clinton, and Nina Sibley's *Divided Houses* and Drew Gilpin Faust in, *Southern Stories: Slaveholders in Peace and War* also wrote about how the roles of women altered during wartime.⁸⁰

Drew Gilpin Faust's *Mothers of Invention* discusses the plethora of new experiences that women created and became involved in during the war. This included the experiences of some unmarried women who had shown devotion to the cause, by dedicating themselves to a life of single blessedness in wartime. More recent work by Faust focuses on Augusta Jane Evans's wartime novel *Macaria: Altars of Sacrifice* and drew parallels between it and the experience of single women in the Civil War, which helped alter perceptions of female singleness. According to Faust unmarried women could demonstrate their devotion to the cause by proving useful in the war, which in turn elevated their social status, and enabled them to expand their spheres.⁸¹ Without doubt, this research concurs with the scholarship that emphasises the idea that the war was a harbinger of change: some temporary, for others more permanent than Rable or Faust would admit.⁸² The Civil War

⁸⁰ Refer to footnote 72 for further studies on the war.

⁸¹ Drew Gilpin Faust, "'Altars of Sacrifice': Confederate Women and the Narratives of War," in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, ed. Catherine Clinton & Nina Sibley (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). See also for the post-war period, Jennifer Lynn Gross, "Lonely Lives are not Necessarily Joyless": Augusta Jane Evans's *Macaria* and the Creation of a Place for Single Womanhood in the Postwar South', *American Nineteenth Century History* 2:1 Spring (2001): 33-52.

⁸² More recently, scholars have started to question the impact that the war had on young women's lives and on their identity as young Confederate girls and women. Scholars such as Anya Jabour and Victoria Ott use the prism of age in order to assess how war affected southern youth and adolescence.⁸² Ott considers how the expectations of young southern women had been altered by the premise of war and the mounting pressure to conform to a Confederate identity, which led them to throw themselves behind the cause, as their own identities were so wrapped up in southern secession, then southern victory. After the war these young Confederate women held on to the conservatism of the past, fearing their place in southern society was dependent on it. In reality it laid the groundwork for a brighter, albeit different future, and one marked by "continuity and change," which seemed to be an often-repeated scenario in southern women's post-war lives.⁸²

led to a new recognition of singleness (or a cultural reassessment of singleness) and new economic challenges and opportunities for planter class women. It expedited trends that were already present in the antebellum years and led to more permanent changes in the post-war years.

Chapter One: The Construction of Femininity in the Antebellum South

On December 2nd 1829, Mary Telfair, a well-to-do spinster from Savannah, Georgia, wrote a letter to her lifelong friend Mary Few on the topic of single blessedness. In her analysis of the single state she made two important observations. First, “a married woman is always of more consequence than a single one.” Second, for a single woman to manage on her own “it requires a vast deal of independence and a variety of resources.”¹ Yet, for Mary Telfair these issues did not prevent her from choosing to remain single. Since she came from one of the richest and most privileged slaveholding families in Georgia, it seems fair to deduce that her experience of single blessedness was coloured by her social, racial, and class position as a Southern lady.² Mary was careful to be *seen* to uphold the tenets of true womanhood, and openly admitted that marriage remained the most desirable status for a woman. Yet at the same time, the mere fact that she chose to remain single, displayed a covert resistance, by consciously rejecting marriage and motherhood in her own life.³

It is therefore clear that the construction of femininity in the Old South was already going through a gradual process of change long before the Civil War. This is reflected in the fact that women from the highest echelons of society were deliberately selecting a life of single blessedness. For families like the Telfairs who Mary claimed were “devoted to a life of single blessedness,” the decision to reject marriage, and with it the opportunity to fulfil the tenets of true womanhood, reveals much about southern

¹ Mary Telfair to Mary Few, 2 December 1829, in Charles Johnson Jr., *Mary Telfair: The Life and Legacy of a Nineteenth-Century Woman* (Savannah: Frederic C. Beil, 2002), 88.

² Betty Wood, ed. *Mary Telfair to Mary Few: Selected Letters 1802-1844* (University of Georgia Press: Athens and London, 2007), xxvii.

³ *Ibid.*, xi-xxxix.

women's perceptions of femininity as defined by the society in which they lived.⁴ This chapter will argue that the boundaries of true womanhood were not quite as rigid as sometimes perceived.⁵ Single women often upheld marriage and motherhood as the hallmark of femininity, but mostly as a way to gain social acceptance in southern society, which helped single blessedness to blossom. This in turn provided single women with a route to greater autonomy.⁶

This chapter concentrates on the construction of femininity in the antebellum South, in the Civil War and beyond, and the way in which unmarried women constructed their identity within the broader framework of traditional gender conventions. It will analyse the way in which single women understood their lives in relation to each other, and also in relation to male authority figures, since they did not have husbands. It begins by setting the scene of what life was like for single women in the antebellum South, particularly in relation to class and to slavery. It explores the extent that single, slaveholding women tried to live up to conventional gender models, such as the Cult of True Womanhood. Within this context it examines non-marriage, widowhood, divorce and, briefly, social widowhood. In doing so, it assesses the disjuncture between the cultural myth of ideal womanhood and the reality of women's lives. Second, it delineates the idea of single blessedness as an alternative framework for understanding single women's lives. Often women replicated certain elements of true womanhood as a route to acceptance in a society that prized marriage and motherhood so highly. Third, it evaluates the impact that the Civil War had in terms of challenging traditional models of femininity, and it shows how the exigencies of war further elevated notions of single blessedness. It also sketches out the scene in the

⁴ Ibid., 18-19.

⁵ Mary Louise Roberts, "True Womanhood Revisited," *Journal of Women's History* (Spring 2002): 150-155.

⁶ Lee Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty A Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780-1840* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1984), 10-28.

post-war period in order to assess just how permanent these changes were in single women's lives.

The Antebellum Setting: Cult and Reality

As early as the 1800s, the South had metamorphosed into a distinct region characterised by plantations, cotton, and black slavery.⁷ It was a vast geographical area that spread from the upper states of Virginia, North Carolina and Tennessee down to Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia (the Lower South). The South was dominated by its agriculture, and defined by its slaves who worked on the land. It was also characterised by class, and the stratification of labour meant that all white men, regardless of their wealth, rank, or class, were higher up the social hierarchy. The existence of slavery was therefore crucial as it bound together different social groups and elevated all whites above their enslaved property, in a racial hierarchy distinctive to the South.⁸

Within this complex web of southern social relations stood the figure of the ideal Southern Lady. She was both a myth and a reality, but often the two did not match up. The Southern lady was a distilled version of the Cult of True Womanhood in the sense that she held a cultural capital unlike any other southern woman.⁹ Anne Firor Scott argues it was fundamentally linked to the fact that the South was a slave society and “because they owned slaves and thus maintained a traditional landowning aristocracy, southerners tenaciously held on to the patriarchal structure,” which included their vision of southern

⁷ William J. Cooper & Thomas E. Terrill, *The American South: A History Volume I* Second Edition (New York: McGraw Hill Companies, 1996), xix.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ For more information on the Southern Lady see: Scott, *The Southern Lady*; Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in The Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Anne Firor Scott, “The Myth of the Southern Lady,” in Stephen Oates ed. *Portrait of America*, Vol.1 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988); *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family and, Marriage in the Victorian South* edited by Carol Bleser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children 1800–1860* (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984).

womanhood that held the Southern lady at its centre.¹⁰ The experience of planter women contrasted sharply to many other groups of southern women (black slaves, the lower class, frontier women) who could never hope to attain its high standards, either because of their racial or class position. Whereas slave women, “answered to a master who was not of their natural family, class or race,” the Southern lady was firmly under the control of family members (her father, husband, or son), which made her compliant in her subordination.¹¹

Historians such as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese suggest that planter women accepted their subordination in the southern hegemony because they were bound to a patriarchal society in a way that black women were not.¹² In other words, elite women had a vested interest in protecting the institution of slavery because it elevated their own status above black and lower class white women, giving them some degree of power and authority albeit within the limitations of their gender. Likewise single, slaveholding women replicated class, race, and gender hierarchies in the way they conducted their lives. They were keen to demonstrate their deference to the broader patriarchy of the South in the hope of gaining acceptance in the family and in society in general, even though they remained unmarried, which inadvertently led to a greater degree of autonomy. Planter class women subscribed to the same conservative worldview as white men, and they often replicated existing hierarchies by accepting their own subordination within the patriarchal order.¹³ Women were taught to accept their subordination as wives and mothers in light of their racial (and for slaveholding women, class) superiority over blacks.

¹⁰ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1970), 256.

¹¹ Mary Beth Norton, *Major Problems in American History: Documents and Essays* (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1995), 408.

¹² Jay Kleinberg, *Women in American Society 1820-1920* (Brighton: BAAS, 1990), 15.

¹³ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988). Also see Linda Kerber’s seminal work, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 9-39.

Slaveholding women in particular had a vested interest in upholding slavery, due to their unique role in southern society as “southern ladies,” which held them up as paragons of moral virtue and ideal womanhood. For women within the slaveholding class or for other elite women who also benefited from slavery in port cities such as Charleston or Savannah, the roles and expectations of them as ladies were heightened because of their elevated social status. The ideal of the Southern lady therefore “constituted the highest condition to which women could aspire to,” and the pressure for them to meet the feminine standard of perfection was intense.¹⁴ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes “the activities of even the most prestigious lady remained carefully circumscribed by the conventions ordained for women in general, and southern culture placed a premium on her meeting the responsibility in accordance with her station.”¹⁵ Therefore, for women who were single, the pressure to still conform must have been intense, which led many to show an outward veneer of acceptance of their required gender roles.

This section will look at the disjuncture between the myth of ideal womanhood and the reality of her everyday life as a means to understand how female singleness fitted into nineteenth-century ideas of femininity. The Cult of True Womanhood was a social construct that inspired and encouraged middle to upper-class white women, to fulfil certain models of femininity, based on marriage, motherhood, and domesticity.¹⁶ It had particular resonance for the upper-class who were seen as the paragons of ideal womanhood, connected to their elevated racial and class position. The Cult of True Womanhood had a strong racial and class bias that was particularly marked in the South because of slavery. Not all women fitted into the mould of the nineteenth-century

¹⁴ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 203.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ For a discussion on the Cult of True Womanhood, see Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: New York University Press, 1980); Nancy. F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1977).

stereotype of an ideal woman that was so heavily emphasised and encouraged in the nineteenth-century South.¹⁷

The four “cardinal virtues” of the Cult of True Womanhood were piety, purity, submissiveness, and of course, domesticity. In nineteenth-century women’s magazines and prescriptive literature women were praised for being weak and timid, “dependent,” and frail. The *Young Ladies Book* summarised the passive virtues of a good woman, which included “a spirit of obedience...submission,” “pliability of temper” and “humility of mind.” *Godey’s Ladies Book* emphasised “wifely duties and childcare” and said women had to ensure the home was a “cheerful, peaceful place” to keep men satisfied and away from outside temptation.¹⁸ The ideal southern woman was expected to be a wife and mother. Men by comparison were the adventurers, the doers, the hardier sex, who thrived in the public sphere of work, politics and business, which allowed their weak and dependent wives to enjoy the peace and quiet of the home and family, which better suited her delicate nature.¹⁹

This doctrine of separate spheres thus separated men and women into distinct zones of work and family, dominance and submission. It was an ideology that dominated the early to mid-nineteenth-century South.²⁰ It targeted the middle to upper-class, and slaveholding women, all of whom were heavily encouraged to live according to its standards. It was also an ideology that kept women in their proper social and familial roles, by severely circumscribing their autonomy beyond the household. By telling

¹⁷ The Cult of True Womanhood was a phrase coined by Barbara Welter in 1966, in reference to a wide collection of nineteenth-century women’s gift annuals and ladies prescriptive literature, that repeatedly either referred directly to, or else alluded to a benchmark of acceptable female behaviour. See Barbara Welter, “Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” *American Quarterly* 18: 2 (1966): 151-174.

¹⁸ Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 159.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 158-159.

²⁰ The Cult of Domesticity also extended beyond the South. For a discussion of the ideological construction of gender in England see, Mary Poovey, *The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). See also, Leonore Davidoff & Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

women that their moral influence and power lay in the home and domestic sphere, men tried to limit women's sphere of independence, and thus bolster theirs.²¹

Female activity was heavily circumscribed in all areas of women's lives – a woman was not permitted to travel alone, she had to curtail her physical activity, dress according to custom, and walk, talk, and even express her emotions within a framework of ladylike decorum. A true lady was never outspoken, nor coarse, she was seldom driven by intellectual pursuits, and she must above all be guided by what made her husband happy.

George Fitzhugh, a sociologist and spokesman on the role of women wrote in 1854:

So long as she is nervous, fickle, capricious, delicate, diffident and dependent, man will worship and adore her. Her weakness is her strength, and her true art is to cultivate and improve that weakness. Women naturally shrinks from public gaze, and from the struggle and competition of life.... in truth, woman, like children, has but one right, and that is the right to protection. The right to protection involves the obligation to obey. A husband, a lord and master, whom she should love and honour and obey, nature designed for every woman...If she is obedient she stands little danger of maltreatment.²²

In George Fitzhugh's view, a woman was only worthy of protection if she showed her willingness to obey male authority. Much like the African-American slave accepting the authority of his master, women were also expected to show their deference to men. This placed unmarried women in an awkward position. Since they had not married, they could be accused of failing to conform to gender stereotypes or to the rule of a master, which was particularly marked for slaveholding women.

This was further complicated by women's legal status under common law. In short, women should mould their identity – to conform – and become subsumed into the identity of their husband. They were expected to pass through life as an “empty vessel, without legal or emotional existence, which complied with their legal identity in marriage.”²³

Herein lay one of the main dilemmas for southern women. They were encouraged to

²¹ Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 151-174.

²² Quoted in Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 17.

²³ Ibid., 159 & 155.

marry in order to fulfil their expectations of true womanhood, but upon meeting this demand, they lost all identity or powers of their own. As Wyatt-Brown argues: “Whereas women’s social existence largely depended upon her being married, her legal identity ended the moment the ceremony was performed,” which meant that she must sacrifice her legal identity in exchange for her social acceptance in southern society.²⁴

In this context it is hardly surprising that some women had an inherent fear of marriage. In spite of the vast literature that encouraged women to fulfil their feminine duty by becoming good wives and mothers, a significant minority of women continued to fear their loss of autonomy. As a consequence of their malaise towards matrimony, some choose not to marry at all and southern women were beginning to look to alternatives to the dominant ideal. Martha Foster Crawford, who later became a missionary in China, was anxious at the prospect of her impending marriage. She confided in her diary: “I have the blues – I can’t help it. And why? I am continually haunted by the idea of *being married*. I feel like a prisoner... I formerly felt free...but now I feel I have my part to act – that I am no longer independent.”²⁵ Martha was not the only woman to use metaphors of imprisonment to describe marriage, other single women spoke of being “hemmed in,” submerged and trapped by the mere thought of marriage.²⁶ Hers is a common theme expressed in single women’s diaries and correspondence. Crawford’s intriguing choice of words reveal how she, like many other impending brides, felt trapped by society’s expectation that she *should* marry which led some women to delay, or avoid it altogether. Martha’s knowledge that she would have a “part to play,” almost outside of herself, which involved “act[ing]” in an appropriate way in order to fulfil her new role, presumably as a wife, and later, as a mother, is telling of the anxieties women harboured about the realities

²⁴ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behaviour in the Old South* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 254.

²⁵ Quoted in Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 33.

²⁶ Grace Elmore Brown, *The Heritage of Woe*, xxviii.

of married life. These included fears of the marriage night (and their first sexual encounter), pregnancy, childbirth and the responsibilities that they would likely have to deal with as a southern wife. The act of marriage ultimately meant a personal act of sacrifice for southern women, who were expected to give up their former selves (and former legal identities) to instead become “empty vessels,” lifted up onto an imaginary pedestal, where they would be congratulated, and be hailed as True Women.²⁷

Joyce Broussard uses the metaphor of married women literally becoming stripped, “naked before the law,” as they exchanged their status as a *femme sole* for that of a *femme covert*.²⁸ In English and American law, coverture referred to a woman’s legal status after marriage. Legally, upon marriage, the husband and wife were treated as one entity – the husband’s – and the woman forfeited any legal identity she previously had in her own right. Simply put, marriage foreclosed a woman’s legal existence in relation to her property rights and a married woman became legally prevented from owning their own property, unless specific provisions had been made before the marriage took place, which were relatively uncommon in the antebellum period.²⁹ A married woman “could not file lawsuits or be sued separately, nor could they execute contracts. The husband could use, sell or dispose of her property without her permission,” rendering her invisible in the eyes of the law and therefore, powerless. William Blackstone’s authoritative legal text *Commentaries in the Laws of England* in 1765 effectively summed up the key features and consequences of coverture:

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing,

²⁷ Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 155.

²⁸ Joyce L. Broussard, “Naked Before the Law: Married Women and the Servant Ideal in Antebellum Natchez,” in *Mississippi Women: their histories, their lives*, ed. Martha H. Swain, Elizabeth Ann Payne, Marjorie Julian Spruill (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 57-77.

²⁹ Chapter Five examines legal rights and property law for single women in the nineteenth century.

protection, and cover she performs everything; and is therefore called a femme covert.³⁰

The importance of understanding both the meaning and implications of coverture as a defining factor in the loss of southern women's identity cannot be overstated. It links to the ideology of true womanhood and reiterates a married woman's position in law as one of anonymity, which fits George Fitzhugh's description of a "nervous", "weak" woman, "shrinking from the public gaze."³¹

Yet, oddly enough, the same cannot be said for a single woman's legal identity. Whilst single women were repeatedly warned about the necessity of marriage, increasing numbers of young girls started to question its centrality in their own lives. Mary Telfair described marriage as a "lottery" that she would rather not partake in.³² Elizabeth Ruffin thought that spinsterhood might be a "more peaceful station" than marriage and motherhood. She prized the "sweets of independence as greatly preferable to...charming servitude under a lord and master." Julia Southall who never-married, chose work over marriage. She remarked: "Doing too well to think of marrying am I not...Freedom is too sweet to think of changing my present situation," and therefore she made a deliberate and self-conscious choice to remain single.³³

In terms of the law at least, single southern women had an identity and a presence that married women could only dream about, which again helps to explain their reluctance to marry. Unlike her married counterpart, single women to all intents and purposes, had the same rights as most men in law: to file lawsuits, to buy and sell property, and to sue or

³⁰ Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England in Four Books: Ninth Edition* (Oxford: W. Strahen & Cadell & D. Prince, 1765) Book One, 442.

³¹ Quoted in Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 17.

³² Mary Telfair to Mary Few, 26 November 1814 in Betty Wood ed., *Mary Telfair to Mary Few, Selected Letters, 1802-1844* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 16.

³³ Elizabeth Ruffin quoted in, Michael O' Brien, *An Evening When Alone: Four Journals of Single Women in the South 1827-67* (Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 11; Julia M. Southall quoted in Jabour, *Scarlett's Sister's*, 275.

be sued. Here again, the disjuncture between the propaganda on female domesticity, claiming to protect women in marriage, and the reality of women's lives was considerable. Marriage signalled the loss of "property rights and obligations" and held few "immunities [and] exemptions," for married women.³⁴ By contrast never-married women and widows retained the freedom to operate a farm or a plantation with the ready workforce of slaves.

Widowhood fell under the umbrella of female singleness. It forced women into new roles; they managed plantations, slaves, and families. They learnt to tread carefully to uphold their image as a planter lady whilst simultaneously demanding an increased share of power in their role as head of household or plantation mistress. These women wielded tremendous socio-economic power, particularly if they held a large number of slaves and productive plantations.³⁵ In contrast to much of the literature on slaveholding widows and Catherine Clinton's unfair assessment that most widows "did not fare well" and were "besieged by financial debts," family breakdown, and legal and social wrangling – the widows in this study tell a more nuanced story.³⁶ Slaveholding widows took pride in their identity and recognised their privileged position in the southern class, race and gender hierarchy.

Consequently, widowhood was seen as an opportunity to use past experience and training in plantation management to good advantage and as a testament to their deceased husband. As Kirsten Wood wrote,

³⁴ Hendrik Hartog, *Man and Wife in America: A History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 93.

³⁵ Victoria Bynum's work on poor, white women in North Carolina underpins the importance of class and wealth to a woman's experience of widowhood. Bynum's examples of slaveholding women reveal how much better they fared in comparison to their poorer counterparts, who were judged unfavourably by southerners. The various ingredients that constituted one's identity as a single, white female – such as race, class, wealth, age and personality – were all key to the experience of widowhood. See also, Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 16, 25, and 73-4.

³⁶ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 76-77; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 202-206 & Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behaviour in the Old South* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 240.

As ladies slaveholding women believed they were superior to most of their sex. They also considered themselves superior to many white men in manners, gentility and piety, qualities that popular opinion deemed white women's special province. Supposedly character based, these assessments invariably reflected class and race privilege.³⁷

Widowhood was therefore another important area in which women exercised autonomy in order to survive. For planter women in particular, the risk of becoming widowed was heightened between 1810 and 1860 as a significant minority of planter families migrated west into the frontier lands in Kentucky, Tennessee and Florida.³⁸ The South was a developing, rural based society, in which some planter families chose to move westwards, into the frontier lands, in pursuit of more plentiful, cheap land, from which they could make their fortune. Women spoke in their letters and diaries of the ever-present anxiety of death and disease that often hung over them in the South. In places such as rural Louisiana, or in the deep heart of Mississippi, women were rarely immune from the shadow of death and disease that threatened to take their loved ones from them.

Male and female slaveholders believed that widows held important responsibilities for maintaining the status quo and therefore failed to extend much sympathy to women who allowed excessive grief to interfere with their new duties as plantation mistresses. Although Philip Schwartz has described widows and spinsters as "legally or socially weak," many cases reflect a far more positive picture of self-reliance and ingenuity. Elite, slaveholding widows would have done all that they could to protect their stake within the southern hierarchy. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues, "Elite, white women themselves preferred a hierarchical society in which they were subordinated, if that was the price for slavery and its exploitation of the poorer classes."³⁹ The position of elite, slaveholding

³⁷ Wood, *Masterful Women*, 13.

³⁸ Joan Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women On the Southern Frontier* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 7-8.

³⁹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2003), 2.

widows also lay outside of the boundaries of a typical planter wife, and therefore she would still have been keen to emphasise her ongoing allegiance with her deceased husband as a way of elevating her own social status. Within the plantation household, widows had attained a privileged position through their previous marital ties in a way that never-married women had not. Widows therefore, continued to be defined by their relationships to men, although not controlled by them. Paradoxically, this placed some widows in a relatively powerful position. Widows both fulfilled and broke the patriarchal rule (subordination to a man). At times, they fell into an ambiguous 'grey zone' in which they were expected to retain key attributes of femininity, whilst being forced into a new role that automatically demanded the masculine traits of resilience, fortitude and business acumen. To a large extent, slaveholding widows proved to be successful in their new roles, managing to combine an air of mastery with the right combination of feminine guile.

Historian Kirsten Wood considers slaveholding widows' performance of mastery and how women honed an image of female autonomy during widowhood to cope with the loss of their husbands and successfully manage and run their plantations. In the development of new identities as single women, widows donned masculine behaviour in conducting business transactions, hiring and firing of slaves, executing slave punishments and as executors of their husbands' wills. Widows therefore combined an apparent contradiction between helpless femininity and widowed responsibility to good effect as they navigated between masculine and feminine gender roles. Tellingly, these new roles of autonomous and independent widowhood were not only tolerated but also accepted within southern society, because they were perceived as acting on behalf of their deceased husbands – rather than for their own self-interest.⁴⁰ Therefore, slaveholding widows in the late

⁴⁰ Wood, "Fictive Mastery," 1-45.

eighteenth-century South were able to rise above the hardship of losing a husband and use their heightened levels of personal autonomy to successfully manage and run their plantations. As Wood reveals, some slaveholding widows put on a performance of masculinity or mastery, and honed an image of female autonomy that was accepted when acting on behalf of a deceased husband – one which would rarely be tolerated in other circumstances.

Virginian widow Martha Cocke, for example, stood firm in her resolve to prove that she was a capable plantation manager after her husband died. As a friend and kinswoman wrote of her:

I suppose they think, as she is one of the fairer, I will not say weaker, sex, she will lack capacity, industry, & for carrying on such business, but really I think she will be quite a Manager, and if she be not, she must at least be rid of the perplexity of a multiplicity of Agents, who seldom prove faithful – by concentrating her business, a great inducement to her.⁴¹

Martha and her sister-in-law, Caroline Cocke, were united in their resolve that she had potential to become “quite a manager” but also recognised that even if she did not fare so well, she would be “rid” of her former agents. As Kirsten Wood recognised, thousands of slaveholding widows reigned successfully over their plantations, slaves, children, and households in the event of their husband’s untimely death. These women rose or fell in their endeavours, largely as a result of their success or failure in crafting new identities for themselves. Widowhood demanded a blend of feminine and masculine gender traits. Ada Bacot, a slaveholding widow from South Carolina, illustrated this point, writing in her diary on February 11th 1861: “I find some of my young Negroes have been disobeying my orders, they were found away from home without a pass. I hope I may be able to make them understand without much trouble that I am mistress and will be obeyed.”⁴²

⁴¹ Martha Cocke to Caroline Cocke, Cocke Family Papers, Section 31, VHS.

⁴² Ada Bacot Diary Entry, 11 February 1861 in Jean V. Berlin (ed), *A Confederate Nurse: The Diary of Ada W. Bacot, 1860-1863* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 27.

Widows rarely emulated masculine behaviour per se, but instead interpreted male authority in their own unique manner. Women were reluctant to use violence to achieve their means where masters would not hesitate.⁴³ For example, on one occasion, when Ada Bacot was working as a housekeeper in Maupin House during the Civil War, she had an “unfortunate incident” with a slave boy named Willie. Bacot noted how she had asked Willie to clear away some dirty dishes, and when he hadn’t done it, she had rather uncharacteristically, lost her temper and “slaped [sic] him in the mouth.” In response to her outburst, “He ran off yelling as if I had hit him with a cudgel, he never rested until he made his nose bleed, than ran to his mother saying I had done it.”⁴⁴ The ugly incident ended with an intense argument with the child’s mother, who was “perfectly frantic”, “like a lioness in a moment.”⁴⁵ In spite of Bacot’s anger with the “impertinent” boy, she nevertheless displayed a guilty conscience at having slapped him, for when Dr. Macintosh decided to whip the Negroes in punishment for insolence, Ada begged him not to, as in her own words, they were generally “good” slaves. However, her words fell on deaf ears, and she recounted that the slaves had a “dreadful time of it,” finally being taken to “gaol” until Mr. Maupin returned. Ada described being “worried sick about it all.”⁴⁶

This particular incident highlights some important points: that Ada Bacot usually enjoyed a satisfactory relationship with her slaves, and was averse to using corporal punishment to reprimand them. On the occasion that she did, she felt guilty about her loss of control, and saw it as unladylike behaviour. An important distinction can therefore be drawn between the behaviour of slaveholding men and women, and how they dealt with recalcitrant slaves; men resorted to violence in order to protect their honour, women shied away from it in order to protect their own ladylike reputation. The incident also showed

⁴³ Wood, *Masterful Women*, 1-5.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 145.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

the limitations placed on white women's power to control certain situations. In other contexts, Ada Bacot demonstrated that she had considerable power and autonomy (in managing her plantation), but here in the social confines of the boarding house, she remained subservient to the patriarchal authority of Dr. Macintosh and Dr. Maupin, even though they were neither her father or her husband, but instead male colleagues in the place in which she worked and lived. Widows therefore, remained fixed by certain gender conventions concerning feminine behaviour even though they were no longer married.

An exception to this rule was the case of social widowhood, which demanded that married women act as temporary heads of households in the absence of the male patriarch. These women remained bound by their coverture as married women, but were granted special privileges to act on their husband's behalf in order to enable him to "enjoy" his "privileges fully" as a man.⁴⁷ In the antebellum (and Civil War) South, husbands were frequently absent from home due to political, economic, business, or social responsibilities. When their husbands were away, often for extended periods of time, married women acted as temporary heads of households, managed plantations, households, slaves and children and, to all intents and purposes, functioned as "temporarily single" women.⁴⁸ Virginian slaveholder Paulina Pollard lived apart from her husband for five years, a burden she simply described as "an additional responsibility."⁴⁹

Rebecca Pilsbury endured months of living alone in her new home in Brazoria, Texas when her husband, Timothy Pilsbury, served as a member of the United States Congress in Washington in 1848. During this time Rebecca kept a detailed diary expressing the difficulties that she faced as a woman on her own. Living in Brazoria, Texas, Rebecca's life as a social widow revolved around the management of her slaves, household, and

⁴⁷ Wood, *Masterful Women*, 28.

⁴⁸ Single Women in History: 1000-2000 at University of the West of England, UK. Hosted by the Women's History Network, 2006.

⁴⁹ Wood, *Masterful Women*, 27. It is not clear where the term 'Social Widow' first originated. I first became aware of the phrase at a conference on 'Singleness' in June 2006.

domestic chores, and the inadequacies she felt as a woman left to manage a plantation alone.⁵⁰ “Today has been a sad day for me. My dear husband left me for Washington, he will be absent five months at least, but I shall try to do what I think will please him and thereby pass the hours more pleasantly,” Rebecca commented in her diary on November 14th, 1848.⁵¹ This must have been a hard task, faced as she was with the constant duties as housekeeper and manager of a small plantation. Her daily tasks ranged from caring for the Negroes, attending to the pigs, pigeons, and poultry, “toil[ing] diligently” in all her “duties” in the hope of making her [absent] husband happy.⁵²

Whilst social widows often kept up a detailed correspondence with their absentee husbands, the reality was that their letters often took days, if not weeks, to reach them, particularly if they lived in a remote locality, as many of them did. Therefore, by the time these women had actually received word from their husband, on anything from what crops to plant, the management of slaves, or other day-to-day management of the plantation, it was often too late and, the decisions had been made. As a result, these women, who acted as temporary plantation managers, or acting head of household, had learnt to develop a wide range of skills that could be put to future use but had been born of the necessity to manage their husbands duties. Mary Steele was forced to adopt surrogate mastery (acting as a lady with temporary power) whilst her husband, John Steele performed his role at the Treasury. “The Steele marriage illustrated the chief reason why slaveholding wives acted as deputy masters: for white men to enjoy their privileges fully, wives simply had to act [out] a manly part when men left their enclosures.”⁵³

Social widowhood was also an important training ground that prepared women in the eventuality they would ever be faced with a permanent state of widowhood. Ruth Stoval

⁵⁰ Rebecca S. C. Pilsbury Diary, SHC.

⁵¹ Rebecca Pilsbury Diary, 14 November 1848, Microfilm Vol. 1, SHC.

⁵² Rebecca Pilsbury Diary, 5 December 1848 & 2 December 1848, SHC.

⁵³ Wood, *Masterful Women*, 28.

Hairston married Peter Wilson, a planter of Berry Hill, Brierfield and Goose Pond in Pittsylvania County, Virginia. The marriage, apparently a happy one, resulted in five children. However, at the age of thirty Ruth was widowed for the first time. In 1816 she married again. Her second marriage to Virginian planter, Robert Hairston, of Leatherwood Plantation in Henry County was by contrast, a tumultuous one. In 1837 Robert moved to Mississippi, with the intention, he claimed, of managing his properties there. He meanwhile left his wife behind in Virginia to single-handedly manage their plantation, for what amounted to literally *years* at a time. There is much speculation surrounding Robert Hairston's decision to re-locate to Mississippi, culminating in the controversy after his death in 1852, when he left a slave child his entire estate, and Ruth none.⁵⁴ The case of Ruth Hairston highlights a few important points, that social widowhood was also a pretext often used by couples to mask more ingrained marital problems, thus avoiding formal separation and divorce. Certainly, this seems to resonate in the case of Ruth Stoval Hairston, who spent over a decade living as a social widow, before her husband died in 1852.

For elite, white women preserving the 'façade' of a good marriage was important to their image and 'respectability' as good southern women. At times the façade became impossible to maintain, and equally for a small but growing number of single women, they chose to voluntarily re-enter the single state through the avenue of divorce. Female divorce petitioners frequently complained that their husbands had failed to live up to their promise of protection. This linked to traditional notions of southern womanhood, and to the marriage contract, whereby a woman gave up her identity in exchange for the protection of her husband, which played an important part in replicating conventional gender hierarchies. However, in the case of divorce it was critical that upper-class women

⁵⁴ Ruth Hairston was widowed for a second time in 1852 when Robert Hairston died. See also, The Wilson and Hairston Family Papers 1751-1928, Folder 1a-8, SHC.

could prove that they had been virtuous women at all times in the marital union and that they had demonstrated that they had tried to be the perfect southern wife. In addition, they must prove that their husband had failed to live up to his promise of marriage thus highlighting his masculinity.

By couching their divorce petitions in the language of benevolence and, by painting themselves as physically weak, dependent, but morally pure models of womanhood, these women showed that the best way to gain a divorce was by displaying their submission to the overarching patriarchy of the courts.⁵⁵ Divorce petitions filed by female complainants in Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Louisiana begun to be granted, even in the antebellum period, though the rate of divorce accelerated in the post-war period as the grounds for granting divorce significantly broadened to include reasons such as drunkenness, cruelty, neglect to provide, infidelity, and miscegenation with female slaves. For example, Martha Smith Green, a planter class woman from Tennessee accused her husband of having an illicit relationship with a slave in 1829 and also, mistreating her so badly that she was ill “for eighteen weeks.”⁵⁶ For married women who were voluntarily seeking a divorce, the actual process presented a real dichotomy. On the one hand they must prove their femininity (weakness, dependency, and so on), but on the other they had to be assertive in order to challenge their husband’s authority by filing a divorce petition in the first place.

In a similar way the outcome of widows’ petitions claiming their dower shares were also equally dependent on them demonstrating their continued femininity or true womanhood. For example, Elizabeth Kirkpatrick a widow from Arkansas showed

⁵⁵ Donna Elizabeth Sedevia, “The Prospect of Happiness: Women, Divorce and Property in the Mississippi Territory, 1798-1817,” *Journal of Mississippi History* LV11: 3 (1995): 189-207; Jane Turner Censer, “‘Smiling Through Her Tears’: Antebellum Southern Women and Divorce,” *American Journal of Legal History* 25 (January 1981): 24-47; Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1992).

⁵⁶ Divorce Petition of Martha Smith Green to the General Assembly of Tennessee, Legislative Petition Analysis Record (hereafter cited as PAR) No. 11482911.

fortitude and agency in disputing a minor's claim on her property following her husband's death. She insisted that the courts recognise that her dower share was separate from the property left to the children, which the courts endorsed.⁵⁷ Likewise on April 15th 1830, Louisiana widow Sarah Anne Moore, petitioned to Orleans Parish in order to recover her "dower property" from her husband, William B. Beldon, which included \$9,096.73 in property, including six slaves. Once again, her petition was granted and the dower share returned.⁵⁸

The situation for widows was equally fraught at times. For most slaveholding widows financial concerns were paramount. Remarriage brought with it significant risk. If a widow had children from her previous marriage, she had to consider whether they would have a good stepfather, and even childless and labouring widows thought twice about re-entering covertures beset with concerns over compromising their own wealth.⁵⁹ The financial consequences of losing a husband, at any age, were undeniable. The age of a widow, and the number (and age) of her children directly affected the receipt of a widow's dower share, a widow's share for life of her husband's estate. Younger widows were often left with small children to raise, as well as plantations to safeguard and manage, until their children reached maturity and could take on the responsibility of plantation management themselves – this took time and money.

Sarah Alston of Halifax County, North Carolina was given the power to "use and manage" her underage children's estates as "to her seems best."⁶⁰ As Wood argues, "A widowed mother left with a houseful of little children also stood a good chance of being

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Kirkpatrick to the Hon. Joseph Scott Sole Judge of the Probate Court of Saline County, Arkansas, Race and Slavery Petitions Project (RSPP), Petition Analysis Record No. 20285701 (hereafter cited as PAR) http://library.uncg.edu/slavery_petitions/index.asp (12/07/2012).

⁵⁸ Sarah Anne Moore to the Honorable Joshua Lewis, Judge of the District Court of the first District of the State of Louisiana, 15 April 1830, RSPP, PAR No. 20883012.

⁵⁹ Wood, *Masterful Women Slaveholding Widows*, 133.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 31. Kirsten Wood explored wills and the property rights of widows from the American Revolution up to the Civil War and examined the way in which they were treated differently in regards to their dower share, in connection to their age and the number and age of their dependents.

given more than a dower. These widowed mothers often bore the weighty responsibility of managing the entire estate for the benefit of their young children.”⁶¹ Thirty-five-year old Sarah Witherspoon from Hartsville Darlington County in South Carolina was widowed in 1861 and with two young children to bring up, became the sole proprietor of the family plantation and other property near Darlington and Springville, South Carolina.⁶² For widows without children, such as Keziah Brevard of Columbia, South Carolina, the experience of widowhood must have felt quite different. In 1861, Brevard lived alone, aged fifty-eight on a large plantation, with only herself and two hundred slaves for company. Each woman’s experience of widowhood was intimately woven into the fabric of their personal lives – whether they were alone or had dependents, where they lived, proximity to friends and family, their ages.

As the nineteenth century progressed there was a steady transformation, or what Lee Chambers-Schiller describes as, a “cultural re-assessment of singleness.”⁶³ Single women helped to alter their image as redundant women, and proved that they could contribute to the patriarchy of the southern family. They did this by upholding their femininity but also by showing that they were willing and useful in their service to others in the family and in the wider community. These women pledged allegiance to an alternative model of womanhood, referred to as the Cult of Single Blessedness that began to remove the stigma of remaining single. Rather than being seen as a curse, the single state began to be seen as a blessing. In advice manuals, such as *Godey’s Lady’s Handbook* or *The Young Lady*, writers began to advise “that no marriage” was better than “an unhappy one contracted out of selfish motives,” which coincided with the rise of companionate marriage and a slow but definite revision of acceptable gender roles.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Robert Ervin Coker Papers, SHC.

⁶³ Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband*, 13-15.

⁶⁴ Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 169.

Single Blessedness

The state of single blessedness gradually gained acceptance as a viable alternative to marriage, which dovetailed with the new ideal of companionate marriage that emerged in line with it. As its name suggests it reflected a more optimistic attitude to the single state, viewing non-marriage as more of an opening for doing good and hence a blessing, rather than a curse. Female singleness began to gradually move away from less favourable stereotypes, which had prevailed in the early to mid-nineteenth century, though of course evidence of some social scorn remains in some cases.⁶⁵ One example of a particularly harsh depicter of the single woman suggested that: “A leech is about as lovely as an old maid of forty-six,” in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1862. An unidentified single woman wrote:

I soak myself in the warm water of interest and sympathy in the lives and happiness of others – in charity – in various other tepid baths– but it’s of no use. I am not really alive – like the poor leech, I have at best a miserable semblance of existence. Who but I has such a dreary and lonely existence?⁶⁶

The publication of articles such as “The Reverie of the Old Maid” highlights that whilst views were changing, some negative stereotypes still continued to persist. Terms such as “spinster” and “old maid” conjured up negative connotations specific to women who never-married. As Lisa Tickner argues, ridicule is “a powerful weapon in the maintenance of hegemony.... it operates as a kind of short circuit to argument in the interests of preserving the status quo,” which was certainly true in the South.⁶⁷ By using words and constructing images that belittled single women, such as redundant or odd, power remained with the white, male hegemony. In this context, it is hardly surprising that women like Mary Telfair or Grace Brown were keen to show a veneer of cultural

⁶⁵ Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband*, 10-28.

⁶⁶ ‘The Reverie of the Old Maid’ *Southern Literary Messenger* (1862): 389-395.

⁶⁷ Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 163.

acceptance on women's place. Paradoxically, by doing this single women maintained a greater degree of personal autonomy and had more flexibility in how they chose to live their everyday lives.

In the South girls were expected to marry young. Based on Catherine Clinton's statistics, the mean age of first marriage for a southern woman was much lower than in northern states, meaning that by the age of twenty-five a woman was officially considered a spinster.⁶⁸ "Twenty-five today and an 'old maid'! Well it's not disgraceful to be with that much abused truce of mortals to belong to the sisterhood through life," wrote Anna Holt in her diary on January 25th 1861.⁶⁹ Anna was well aware that she had passed the usual age of marriage for a girl in her position, and had resigned herself to a life of single blessedness. Ann Reid was unmarried by thirty and later considered her single state as a relief and good fortune – she felt that she was "free from household duties and [instead] dedicated herself to religion."⁷⁰ Grace Elmore Brown recognised too that she was not suited for marriage, assuring herself, "I am not trusting enough to let myself be guided by a human creature. I could scarcely be happy with any man."⁷¹ Angelina and Sarah Grimké were the daughters of a wealthy South Carolinian slaveholder. They also had little inclination to marry, but for different reasons. The two Grimké sisters had formed part of an anti-slavery duo and had exiled themselves from the South. They stood out as radicals who "rejected their birthright, moved north and became abolitionist crusaders."⁷² The sisters' philosophical and political ideas blacklisted them as "pariahs within slaveholding

⁶⁸ Catherine Clinton calculated the age at first marriage of women in the South. This was based on a sample of "750 members of the planter elite born between 1765 and 1815." The sample reveals that 1.9 percent of women married at fifteen, 7.0 percent at sixteen, 9.9 percent at seventeen, 10.2 percent at eighteen, 9.9 percent at nineteen, 11.8 percent at twenty, with 22 percent of southern girls married between 21-25 years. See Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in The Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), Appendix A and B, 233.

⁶⁹ Anna Elizabeth Holt Diary, 25 January 1861, Virginia Historical Society (hereafter cited as VHS).

⁷⁰ Jane Pease & William Pease, *Ladies, Women and Wenches: Choice and Constraint in Antebellum Charleston and Boston* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 20.

⁷¹ Marli Weiner ed., *A Heritage of Woe: The Civil War Diary of Grace Elmore Brown 1861-68* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1997), xxviii.

⁷² Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 180-1.

culture.”⁷³ As such the Grimke’s were considered loquacious and unfeminine by society. In their failure to conform – or at least to show that they conformed to conventional gender models – they became a threat to society, and therefore faced ridicule and abuse. Many observers saw the publication of *An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, written by Angelina Grimké in 1836 as a juvenile outburst that did not befit a woman’s place. For the sisters the pursuit of marriage was surpassed by a love of politics, of righteousness and morality for all – black and white. That said, at the late-age of thirty-three Angelina did eventually marry. Her sister Sarah Grimké remained single for life, but shared the home of her sister and brother-in-law in an unconventional set-up that suited them all.⁷⁴

For many of these women their future happiness firmly rested on being able to remain single – rather than in attaining marriage and motherhood. In contrast to the unfavourable simile of the leech, increasing numbers of well-to-do southern women paid homage to the blossoming of an alternative literature by and about single women. Unmarried domestic novelist Augusta Jane Evans provided an alternative vision of southern femininity in her writing, which made it acceptable for women to remain single.⁷⁵ It was known as the Cult of Single Blessedness and was rooted in the belief that women could fulfil a useful role outside of marriage. It was part of the cultural re-assessment of singleness that had gradually begun after the revolutionary war that had made “some Americans dramatically change their attitudes towards marriage and singlehood.”⁷⁶ Chambers-Schiller describes how attitudes towards singles began to change in the North, and later filtered down into the southern consciousness, crystallising in the

⁷³ Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina; Rebels Against Slavery* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 1-12.

⁷⁴ Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters*, 1-12.

⁷⁵ Drew Gilpin Faust, “‘Altars of Sacrifice’: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War,” in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, eds. Catherine Clinton & Nina Baym (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 171-200.

⁷⁶ Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband*, 12.

Civil War period.⁷⁷ Certainly, the Civil War rapidly escalated the process of the cultural re-assessment of single women. Women's lives altered dramatically in wartime, and for slaveholding women this was particularly marked because of the destruction of slavery that took them down alongside it.⁷⁸

Another important social change in southern society was the rise of a new marriage ideal that started to take foot in the antebellum period. So-called "companionate marriage," moved away from the "standard formula for successful marriage" which focused on "property, earning capacity and social standing," in the early nineteenth century and instead "placed love and emotions at the centre."⁷⁹ It really took off in the post-war period, as the separate spheres between men and women started to break down and the expectations of marriage changed. However, even in the antebellum South women began to assert themselves in their families and voiced their demand that they must marry for love rather than to secure their family the best "calculable assets" possible.⁸⁰

Sarah Morgan from Baton Rouge, Louisiana balked at the idea of marriage and motherhood, clearly stating that she wanted "no man for her lord and master," and she stuck to her resolve until she was in her early forties, when she finally married a widower, Frank Dawson, with whom she found love and companionship in the post-war period.⁸¹ Mary Wylie also married late (at the age of twenty-five) to a man she adored and she was the envy of her two unmarried sisters. In a letter from Hannah Wylie to her unmarried sister Susan, she wrote, "You may guess that I compared our old maidism with the blissful married state [of Mary and Dr. Wylie] but no hints to Dr and M. for I must confess that

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ The Civil War is discussed in more detail shortly.

⁷⁹ Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (London: W.W. Norton & Company: 1985), 16.

⁸⁰ The rise of companionate marriage can also be linked to changes in Married Women's Property Law (and the rise of the separate estate), which allowed women to protect any property that they took into the marriage with them. This meant that wealthy slaveholding families were less concerned that their property would be put at risk if daughters married for love, rather than property.

⁸¹ East, *Sarah Morgan*, xxi.

there is an exception in all rules” and they were it!⁸² Others echoed Susan Wylie’s view that companionate marriage was still relatively scarce. Even women who were married recognised its shortfalls. Civil War diarist Mary Boykin Chestnut from Charleston, South Carolina, took a cynical view of marriage,

It is an odd thing. In all of my life how many persons have I seen in love? Not a half-dozen and yet I am a tolerably close observer, a faithful watcher of men and manners. Society for me has been only an enlarged field for character study. Flirtation is the business of society. That is play at love-making; it begins in vanity, it ends in vanity. It is spurred on by idleness and a want of other excitement.... it is a pleasant but very foolish game.⁸³

Other well-to-do women compared marriage to the state of single blessedness and the former still came up short. Mary Telfair was convinced that she would never find a suitable mate: “I never have, could, or will see a soul in a man worth loving,” she admitted in May 1818.⁸⁴ Mary was also a keen social observer, who often wrote about other people’s marriages. On one occasion she used the metaphor of two birds trapped in a cage to emphasise how not all marriages were companionate ones. This linked to her earlier reticence towards marriage, because she could not find a suitable mate. In a letter written in the early 1800s she wrote that, “two people coming together in holy wedlock always reminds me of two birds in a cage unless they sing in Concert, what discord ensues – far better to chirp tune their notes on some lonely spray, unseen unheard in ‘single blessedness,’ for a solus well performed, is preferable to an indifferent duet.”⁸⁵ The contrast of the “solus well performed” to the “indifferent duet” is a reference to companionate marriage. She highlights the wider view of many women that started to take root in the early nineteenth century, which was that it was better to remain single than to

⁸² Susan to Hannah Wylie, undated letter, Wylie Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina (hereafter cited as SCL).

⁸³ Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie* (Boston: Houston Mifflin, Sentry Edition, 1951), 463.

⁸⁴ Mary Telfair to Mary Few, 24 May 1818, William Few Collection, in Charles Johnson Junior, *Mary Telfair: The Life and Legacy of a Nineteenth-Century Woman* (Savannah: Beil Publishers, 2002), 87.

⁸⁵ Mary Telfair to Mary Few, 24 July, no year (item 292), and 7 January 1828 (item 28), both in the William Few Collection, Georgia Archives, Morrow, quoted in Carter, *Southern, Single Blessedness*, 1.

marry for convenience or endure a lifetime with the wrong mate. This new philosophy made room for alternative models of femininity to take root in the Old South.

Of course, not all women wanted to marry. South Carolinian Grace Elmore Brown confessed at the tender age of twenty-two, her hopes for the future, which did *not* involve matrimony. “Marriage has precious little share in my plans for the future,” she confided in her journal on September 13th, 1862, “Marriage for me would hardly be a happy state,” a conclusion she had reached by virtue to the fact that none of the men who she might want to marry would want to marry her.⁸⁶ Even earlier still, women such as Mary Telfair wrote disparagingly in reaction to a rumour circulating that she was to marry. Telfair said in disgust:

Neither Jew nor Gentile has any chance in drawing me as a prize in the great lottery of matrimony. I am too great a lover of liberty to resign it particularly to an Israelite besides I belong to a family devoted to “single blessedness” therefore, my dear Mary believe anything you hear of me sooner than I am going to be married, not that I am an enemy of the holy institution, I approve highly of the state when two persons enter into it from disinterested affection and when there exists a congeniality of character, but I have always thought the number of happy matches considerably less than unhappy and always conclude there are faults on both sides, among the whole circle of my acquaintances I know of but one couple who came up to my idea of a rational pair.⁸⁷

In this extract three key points require further attention. First, the way in which Telfair equates “matrimony” with the loss of “liberty.” Second, her observation that only one couple, out of all of her married friends (which was probably a considerable number as Telfair was twenty-three years old when she wrote this letter in October 1814) were well suited. Third, Telfair demonstrates that spinsterhood was a rational choice, and one that she had consciously made, and not one that had been made for her. She freely admitted

⁸⁶ Marli Weiner ed., *A Heritage of Woe: The Civil War Diary of Grace Elmore Brown 1861-1868* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 40.

⁸⁷ Mary Telfair to Mary Few, 28 October 1814 in, Betty Wood (ed.), *Mary Telfair to Mary Few: Selected Letters, 1802-1844* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2007), 21. The phrase ‘single blessedness’ can be traced back to William Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 1:1.

that she did not “envy a woman her husband,” also noting that, “I have never viewed the state of single blessedness with horror.”⁸⁸

Another tactic used by some women was to try and delay marriage, rather than put it off altogether.⁸⁹ Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill Plantation in the Shenandoah Valley felt the same way and deliberately extended the period between courtship and matrimony in the hope of finding the ‘right’ mate.⁹⁰ “Let people talk as much as they choose about engagements being happy, my late experience does not increase my faith in the idea. Engagements lead too certainly to matrimony,” confessed Breckinridge after calling off her engagement to Lt. Thomas Jefferson Bassett, convinced that he was the wrong match.⁹¹ Anya Jabour argues that the prolonging of life stages was indicative of girls’ “reluctance to accept the socialization into their assigned roles” as wives and mothers, and not simply fear of making the wrong choice. It was a symbol of women’s silent resistance to the prescribed norms of nineteenth-century southern society, and an attempt to hold on to their identity as single women.⁹²

What is striking about these young, slaveholding white women, was the passion and determination with which they delayed or rejected marriage, and the positive metaphors they often used to describe the unmarried state. Three main reasons seem to have led to the development of new attitudes towards female singleness: the rise of companionate marriage, single women’s real or mimicked desire to replicate traditional gender roles in being useful to others, and of course the impact of the Civil War in terms of challenging gender constructions. As attitudes started to change towards marriage, parents also began to advise their daughters to choose their husbands carefully or at least by a different set of

⁸⁸ Johnson, *Mary Telfair*, 87.

⁸⁹ Anya Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 47-83.

⁹⁰ Ibid. For example, this could be achieved by delaying the coming of age by spending longer in education.

⁹¹ Victoria Ott, *Confederate Daughters: Coming of Age During the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 116-7.

⁹² Anya Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*.

criteria. As early as 1782, John Gregory wrote a popular advice book *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* in which he acknowledged that whilst it was at times difficult to remain single, he still “urged his daughters and readers to remain unmarried rather than marry the wrong man for the wrong reasons,” which was a revelation at the time.⁹³ The importance of having positive relationships with male authority figures in the family, who encouraged women to marry for affection and love further added to women’s resolve to remain single if necessary.

This can be seen in the case study of the Wylie family. Susan Wylie came from a well-known slaveholding family from upstate South Carolina. Her parents, Peter and Anne Wylie, had eight children. Of the five daughters, two remained unmarried and a third married late but chose to remain childless (an active display of autonomy in itself). This was most likely achieved through abstinence in order to exercise control over both her body and her life, as she wanted to live it. Hannah and Susan remained unmarried, and Mary married late at around twenty-five years of age, to a Doctor, William Mobley. Of all the daughters, Susan particularly clashed with the men in her family in her views on politics, marriage, and men (normally in that order) which comes across clearly in her letters of correspondence with male and female members of the family. In doing so she challenged traditional ideas that women should be submissive and meek.⁹⁴ Her ideas often contradicted that of the Wylie men. Her opinions were expressed with drama and conviction, and revealed an image of a woman dissatisfied with the role in which she was placed, but also of a woman who was allowed to express herself in the context of her family. As Jeff Hoffman observes, “There was a longing for more autonomy but also a

⁹³ John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1782).

⁹⁴ In fact, throughout her long life Susan Wylie sustained a lively correspondence with various male members of her extended family, including her nephews, who wrote to her for advice and shared conversations about politics.

realization that this longing could not be fulfilled” beyond certain bounds.⁹⁵ Susan Wylie’s relationships with the men in her life, mostly, if not exclusively with men in her family, were overwhelmingly companionate and open. She looked on, a little green-eyed, at her sister Mary’s good fortune, to have found such an ideal mate in Dr. Mobley, but also recognised that her sister’s good fortune was a rare find.

The overall impression gleaned from Susan Wylie’s correspondence is one of “independence and outspokenness in a period that did not honor such behaviours in women.”⁹⁶ Her identity was afforded space to breathe and grow, even though she often complained about it and there is rarely any indication that the Wylie family tried to curb their sister’s enthusiasm. Nor did this fact seem to alarm the Wylie sisters, or their father, who would have been expected to at least discourage such outspokenness in his daughters. On the contrary, Peter Wylie often “grumbled about politiks [sic] and sometimes branche[d] out into religion” when being nursed by his unmarried daughter during his long spells of ill health. Perhaps, single women were afforded a degree of leeway in terms of their outspokenness in their own families, because in other ways they clearly mirrored conventional gender roles. For example, Susan nursed her father during his long period of ill health. In her obituary she is noted for her “assiduous and untiring attendance on the sick of her extended family circle.”⁹⁷ The obituary continues, “her neighbours also, in sickness and distress, never failed to receive her active sympathies, exhibited by those kind services which she could so intelligently and efficiently render...although her sphere was limited, few can claim life so entirely devoted to acts of benevolence,” thus stressing her feminine virtues above all else. Susan Wylie’s obituary paints a picture of a woman who embraced the model of true womanhood, of a lady who was satisfied in her caring

⁹⁵ Jeff Hoffman, “Wylie Women and Accommodating Men: Three sisters attempts at asserting autonomy in pre-Civil War South Carolina,” (Unpublished Paper, Constance B. Schultz Collection, University of South Carolina, Columbia), 13.

⁹⁶ Hoffman, ‘Wylie Women,’ 17& 14.

⁹⁷ Obituary of Miss Susan Ann Wylie, 6 October 1857, Wiley Papers, SCL.

role and in her service to neighbours and extended family. It tells us nothing of the vexations, frustration and outspokenness that also characterised her life.

Historian, Jennifer Lynn Gross argues “positive images of single womanhood and an acceptance of marriage as the best place for women coalesced because [single women] still behaved within the bounds of true womanhood that confined married women.”⁹⁸ Gross was speaking with reference to the work of domestic novelists like Augusta Jane Evans, who wrote about the role of single women in her novels. Augusta turned to writing and proved to be one of the most successful domestic novelists in the South of her time. In her novels she often praised the single woman, but continued to make it clear that marriage and motherhood remained as the most favoured ideal for southern women.⁹⁹ As a novelist, Augusta Evans gained a good reputation and honourable identity for herself in her public role as a writer. In the act of writing domestic novels about courtship, marriage and female singleness, and by portraying the latter in a positive and more useful light, Evans forged a ‘respectable’ identity for herself as a womanly, upper-class woman.¹⁰⁰

Nonetheless, by broadening women’s sphere as writers, Evans helped alter the image and identity associated with single women. It seems ironic that by publicly endorsing the pivotal role of marriage and motherhood, domestic novelists such as Evans found themselves in a position to broaden their own social spaces. By writing, they protected themselves from public criticism and developed effective strategies that allowed them to fit in, or at least be accepted within the existing status quo, rather than seen to be balking against it.

⁹⁸ Jennifer Lynn Gross, “Lonely Lives are not Necessarily Joyless”: Augusta Jane Evan’s *Macaria* and the Creation of a Place for Single Womanhood in the Postwar South’, *American Nineteenth Century History* 2:1 (2001): 33-52, 46-47.

⁹⁹ Rebecca Grant Sexton, ed. *A Southern Woman of Letters: The Correspondence of Augusta Jane Evans Wilson* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), xxii.

¹⁰⁰ For further information on single women gaining respectability by promoting feminine roles in others, see Jenea Tallentire, “Everyday Athena’s: Strategies of Survival and Identity for Ever- Single Women in British Columbia, 1880-1930” (PhD dissertation, The University of British Columbia, 2006).

In constructing alternative identities for themselves as single women, southern women often subscribed to, and replicated, the key attributes of true womanhood. In doing so they gained respectability and social acceptance, and were no longer seen as a threat to male authority:

Respectability was a type of symbolic capital, a currency; those who had it could negotiate the conditions of their lives in the same way that economic or educational capital shaped their chances. Through dedicating their careers to securing femininity, some ever-single women could claim a place amongst the respectable, taking authority as those who name rather than those who are named.¹⁰¹

Piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity were important watchwords for single women. Sarah Varick Cozens, a young unmarried woman from North Carolina, managed a school in the mid-1830s. She often felt overwhelmed by her duties and spoke in her diary of her “incapability of training up little mortals” which may well have been true, but in saying so she also replicated traditional models of female weakness. “I know I can do nothing. To thee, O my God do I look for help,” she penned in her diary. By looking up to God for help and reassurance, she therefore demonstrated her piety.¹⁰² Unmarried women had to show that they were pure and passionless in their conduct with men, even more so than married women, as any indiscretion could lead to accusations that they had encouraged male advances.

Single women also had to demonstrate that they were submissive in order to fulfil the ideal of single blessedness. This was of course more difficult because as unmarried women they had both rejected male authority by remaining single but also they had an elevated legal status as a *femme sole* that afforded them certain legal rights that married women were stripped of. Submissiveness could be shown in a variety of ways, most commonly by devolving power to their family and by rallying to its needs, which linked to

¹⁰¹ Sexton, *A Southern Woman*,

¹⁰² Sarah Varick Cozens Diary, 15 September 1834, SHC.

the attribute of domesticity. An unmarried woman's identity was therefore very much tied to her family of birth. An unmarried daughter could, for example, demonstrate her submission to the family's needs, by sacrificing her own, particularly in the event of sickness or a death in the family. North Carolinian Margaret Bain Cameron delayed marriage in exchange for caring for her younger siblings and sick father, when her mother died in 1842. Likewise, Henrietta Augusta Drayton forfeited marriage to stay at home and care for her sick parents, whilst Harriott, Frances and Anne Percy delayed matrimony to help their father manage plantation affairs.¹⁰³ For these single women, death was a harbinger of change that signalled a shift in their personal identities as single women, often taking them on a journey from temporary to permanent singlehood. It could enhance their image of single blessedness but it also tied them to the family that could be both a restriction and a burden.

The loss of a girl's mother often had lasting consequences; not only in terms of their personal development but also in terms of the commitments they had to take on. The eldest unmarried daughter within the family was often expected to take on the responsibilities of their deceased mother, especially if there were younger siblings to consider. A mother's death therefore meant for the eldest daughter a change in her perceived identity and also marked a heavy increase in terms of her additional responsibilities within the immediate family. It was expected that the eldest female sibling would shoulder the responsibility of managing their natal family (including their father) in the event of their mother's death. Death in a southern family affected everyone, but its impact on single, southern women was particularly marked. Again, it opened a doorway to prove their devotion to single blessedness, which helped to revise conventional gender models but it could also be a source of hard work and constraint.

¹⁰³ This is discussed in Chapter two on the family.

There are many cases of the maiden aunt who took on the additional responsibilities of raising nieces after the death of a married sister. Mary Susan Ker, a single woman who grew up in a planter class family in Natchez Mississippi, took on the lifelong responsibility of bringing up two of her nieces, Mamie and Nellie Ker, following the death of her sister-in-law just after the Civil War.¹⁰⁴ Mary Telfair assisted her sister-in-law in bringing up her niece, Margaret Long, after her brother Thomas's death in 1818. Death in the extended family significantly altered single women's responsibilities, such as becoming surrogate mothers to their relation's children.¹⁰⁵ For some, the added responsibility was a delight, which helped shape their lives accordingly. For others, it was a heavy burden, which they took on out of a sense of duty and as a way of demonstrating their usefulness to both their families as well as to their wider communities. By doing so, they were able to show that they had fulfilled their calling to single blessedness.¹⁰⁶ By the time of the Civil War, the Cult of Single Blessedness was quickly maturing as an alternative model of femininity that unmarried women could aspire to. The coming of the Civil War further accelerated a growing acceptance of unmarried women. Even in the planter class there was an awakening to the reality that the necessities of war might lead to a temporary revision of gender conventions as so many southern men went off to fight, and women were called upon to fill their roles. The war itself also spurred on a wave of new activities for southern women, they became plantation managers, nurses, teachers, government workers, factory workers, milliners, and a variety of other occupations dependent on their social position, class, and marital status.

¹⁰⁴ Mary Susan Ker Papers, SHC.

¹⁰⁵ Wood, *Mary Telfair*, Introduction, xxv.

¹⁰⁶ Ironically, these additional burdens often resulted in women delaying marriage – either consciously or unconsciously, as they became embroiled in caring for their siblings at the expense of enjoying their expected 'coming out' season.

The Civil War

As Alabaman Augusta Jane Evans made clear in her wartime novel *Macaria; Altars of Sacrifice*, the war represented a unique opportunity for single women to prove they were useful, by doing good deeds that would breed self-fulfilment. Augusta was an unmarried woman, who had worked for a short time as a nurse in the Civil War, caring for Confederate soldiers (even though she had initially been dissuaded from doing so by her brothers, who considered such a vocation unsuitable for a young lady of her class) and it was from these experiences that she penned her wartime novel *Macaria*.¹⁰⁷ What is interesting about Augusta's novel is the central character, an unmarried woman named Irene, who dedicates her life to the pursuit of "Womanly Usefulness" after the loss of her lover. Irene in many ways represents the single women of the Confederacy, the never-married and widowed women, whose mantra in life was to be "useful". As in the story of *Macaria* "It is the blessing – and *Macaria* also means blessing in Greek – of the single woman to be more useful because she belongs exclusively to no one, her heart expands to all her suffering fellow creatures."¹⁰⁸ Certain parallels can be drawn between the novel and the reality of single women's lives in the Civil War. It offered them a unique opportunity, even more meaningful and pronounced than their married counterparts, to do something important, and thereby fulfil their potential as women, thus establishing their true identity. Single women, like Irene, could literally sacrifice themselves to the cause, and in doing so gain acceptability and respectability. For these unmarried women, their willingness to dedicate themselves to cause and country, in whatever capacity it demanded of them, was not something to be feared, but something to be "celebrated." It cemented their identity as

¹⁰⁷ Drew Gilpin Faust, "Confederate Women and Narratives of War," in Catherine Clinton and Nina Sibley, *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 188-190.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

“useful” and “virtuous” single women but also offered them the opportunity for self-fulfilment.¹⁰⁹

As Anne Firor Scott notes, “The challenge of war called women almost at once into new kinds and into new degrees of activity,” both within the home and also outside of it.¹¹⁰ As men dashed off in defence of their fledgling nation’s right to independence (and their right to own slaves), women started to extend their own sphere of influence in response to wartime demands. Virginia Hammett was a young lady of “Oakland,” in Stafford County, Virginia. When the war began she was about eighteen years old, and lived a quiet life with her parents and sister on their large family farm.¹¹¹ Virginia, a fervent secessionist and a despiser “of all things Yankee,” threw herself into her new wartime responsibilities with enthusiasm. “Necessity is the mother of ingenuity,” claimed Virginia in August 1863, in reference to her nursing the wounded soldiers, who she described in graphic detail. “I saw a great many wounded, some with eyes shot out, noses shot away, ears off, fingers off, arms, hands, flesh wounds through legs, arms, and shoulders.”¹¹² Living in such close proximity to the battlefield, just “six miles north of Fredericksburg” meant that the Hammett family and their neighbours had regular contact with injured soldiers as well as Yankees who frequently trespassed on their property. In February 1863, Virginia penned in her diary, “I have been cursed, abused, robbed, insulted, my life threatened, and I have been seized by a Yankee soldier, rudely shaken and struck over the head with a stick... have heard my grey haired father cursed by the lowest soldiery, have heard them threaten to hang him in his own yard...have seen my home and that of my neighbours made desolate, been robbed almost to starvation.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 81.

¹¹¹ Virginia also had an older brother, John Hammett, who lived in nearby Prince William County with his wife Lucy Carney. See also Virginia Hammett Diary, VHS.

¹¹² Virginia Hammett Diary, 7 May 1863, VHS.

¹¹³ Ibid., 8 February 1863.

In numerous entries in her journal, Virginia confides her fear of Yankee intruders, of lack of food and of bad treatment. She even admits “I have slept night after night with an axe at my bedside and an unsheathed dagger under my pillow, with the terrible determination to defend myself if possible.”¹¹⁴ The fact that Virginia felt the need to protect herself speaks volumes about the war and the way it changed southern women’s lives. In the absence of the men, and even in the presence of those few men who had remained, women felt unprotected and at risk. The war then, did not simply alter the roles and responsibilities of southern women; it also forced them to temporarily change their nature as true women. Virginia talks about hiding an “unsheathed dagger” under her pillow each night, a decision that challenged every notion of femininity. She also imagined herself as a soldier and day dreamed of fighting as a man in the war, though she admitted, “I confess these are not very womanly feelings but one thing I know let nay [sic] one who had any spirit or love for country, be placed in my situation and they will sometimes feel as these lines express.”¹¹⁵ Other southern women also shared her sentiments. Grace Elmore Brown longed to “battle with life as men do, and expend in action those energies that work but to excite fretfulness because denied the true outlet.”¹¹⁶ Elizabeth Collier wrote a simple note in her diary in 1862, “Would God I were a man.”¹¹⁷

Drew Gilpin Faust argues that these sentiments conceal an even deeper dissatisfaction with women’s assigned gender roles as well as a nagging belief that men had let them down, because of their failure to adequately protect them during the war.¹¹⁸ According to Faust, southern women, particularly those from the slaveholding class, had been the ones who had encouraged secession in protection of their way of life, and for the

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 23 June 1863.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 2 December 1863.

¹¹⁶ Grace Elmore Brown Diary, 23 November 1861 in Weiner, *A Heritage of Woe*, 16.

¹¹⁷ Elizabeth Collier Diary, 11 April 1862, SHC in Drew Gilpin Faust, “Confederate Women and Narratives of War,” 176.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

preservation of their social position, but they were also the first ones to feel dissatisfaction when men faltered in their failure to protect them.¹¹⁹ For these women, the code of honour, that had made women look up to their men as strong, patriarchal, and protective figures, was broken.

War also affected attitudes to marriage. For some women who were single, the response was one of panic, to marry any man, and fast, in order to secure them a measure of protection and to avoid what they still considered the blight of spinsterhood. Virginia Hammett spoke of a “marrying disease” that “had taken possession of our neighbourhood and there is no telling who it will attack” next.¹²⁰ She spoke in horror about a young girl “just grown” who was marrying “an old man of fifty” so desperate was she to be wed!¹²¹ However many more southern women had the opposite response to marriage which was simply to avoid it altogether. Lucy Breckinridge was sixteen when the war broke out, and lived at Grove Hill Plantation in the Shenandoah Valley. Though “countless” men pursued her, she remained, for a long time, quite steadfast in her desire to remain single. She had carefully deduced that marriage (for many) was not a happy state. It was dominated by hard work, caring for children, and husband pleasing, and she would not do it unless she met a suitable match.¹²²

Virginia Hammett had no desire to marry whilst the guns were still firing in the not-so-distant background. As she pointed out rather sensibly, she did not want to marry in wartime: “I do not approve of it, I have no fancy for being married to-day and probably widowed tomorrow,” which was for some slaveholding women an all too familiar story.¹²³

Virginia wrote in her diary that many of her contemporaries would be “compelled to

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 177.

¹²⁰ Virginia Hammett Diary 14 August 1864, VHS.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 52-53.

¹²³ Virginia Hammett Diary 10 December 1863 and 3 April 1864, VHS.

spend our days in single blessedness” due to the countless “slaughters” of the battle field that would leave many young girls “matchless.”¹²⁴ No doubt, the “slaughters” were a reference to the unprecedented loss of life in battles such as Gettysburg in June-July 1863, when the Confederate Army lost a staggering 28,000 men (a third of the army under Robert E. Lee’s command) in a harrowing blood bath that lasted three days.¹²⁵

The reality of war meant that many southern women lost men: husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers. As one southerner exclaimed “War makes its widows by the thousand,” and this was certainly true in the case in the Confederacy.¹²⁶ Both inside and outside of wartime, widows had to prescribe to certain codes or gender conventions in order to fit in or gain respectability. For elite and upper-class women who were widowed, it was important that they continued to uphold the image of “virtuous womanhood” in spite of the fact that they were newly single. In the Civil War and post-war era the definition of “virtuous womanhood” that had dominated the antebellum era continued to be present.¹²⁷ According to Chagsin Lee this was a particularly important image that widows were expected to uphold following the loss of their husband because virtuous womanhood was seen as an extension of female propriety and a visual symbol that women continued to act in the best interests of their husbands as opposed to their own self-interest. A broader point can be drawn from this statement, which is that widows, who were also legally defined as single women, were often able to explain more autonomous behaviour (in terms of managing plantations, buying and selling property and managing slaves) by claiming that they were acting in the interest of their deceased husbands.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Alan Farmer, *The American Civil War 1861-1865* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), 54-55.

¹²⁶ Harriett Perry to her sister Mary Temperance, 22nd October 1864 in Jane Johansson, ed. *Widows by the Thousand: The Civil War Letters of Theophilus and Harriet, 1862-1864* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), viii.

¹²⁷ Chagsin Lee, “Beyond Sorrowful Pride: Civil War Pensions and War Widowhood, 1862 –1900,” (PhD Dissertation, The College of Arts and Sciences Ohio University, March 1997), 84.

Slaveholding widow Ada Bacot from Darlington, South Carolina was thrice widowed, once prior to the war, again during it, and a third time well into old age.¹²⁸ After the death of her first husband and two small children, Bacot galvanised herself into action by her steely determination and successful management of her Arndale plantation and the maintenance of its tobacco and cotton production. Ada Bacot was atypical in that the level of responsibility she shouldered and the power concentrated in her hands was far greater than that of many planter class women. Her wealth and position as a slaveholding widow provided her with additional freedoms that her married sisters did not share. “Under early American law, widowhood turned a wife bound by coverture into a free and legally independent woman. Widows were their own people both legally and economically ...they needed no guardians, sponsors or patrons and often became heads of productive households, with authority over space, capital and labour.”¹²⁹

Ada Bacot’s is only one story but it reflects two wider points. First, that if a widow was unusually wealthy, she often tended to fare better than poorer widows, which highlights the relationship between class, marital status, and independence. Second, it reflects the difficulty in any attempt to try and categorise women by virtue of their marital status, as invariably women shifted between non-marriage, marriage, widowhood and even divorce. It was not that dissimilar to Mary Telfair’s opening statement that “it requires a vast deal of independence and a variety of resources” for a never-married woman to enjoy a good life.¹³⁰ Ada Bacot’s marital status shifted considerably during the course of her life cycle, and it is in this area of her life that she tells a wider truth about all southern women who shifted in and out of marriage and singleness, particularly during and after the Civil War. The increase in spinsterhood was also particularly acute during

¹²⁸ Jean V. Berlin. (Ed), *A Confederate Nurse: The Diary of Ada W. Bacot 1860-1863* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1994), 1-15.

¹²⁹ Wood, *Masterful Women*, 4 -5.

¹³⁰ Mary Telfair to Mary Few, 2 December 1829, in Charles Johnson Jr., *Mary Telfair: The Life and Legacy of a Nineteenth-Century Woman* (Savannah: Frederic C. Beil, 2002), 88.

the period of the Civil War, with so many men away fighting in the preservation of southern independence. Women too were left alone for vast periods of time, with few marriageable partners to choose from. Clearly, the lack of 'available' men to marry began to alter attitudes towards the single state, which shall be explored in chapter three and four.

Conclusion

For single women, the post-war period was important in helping to determine how permanent the changes in their lives were. In terms of the figure of the Southern lady whose elevated social position was secured by the presence of slavery, the post-war period held special significance. All women's lives changed in the context of war and its aftermath; they had to in order to mobilise their efforts in aid of the families and for the Confederacy.¹³¹ Yet more than any other group in southern society, the war had been waged in the interest of the planter class, in order to protect the institution of slavery on which their privilege and class position was based.¹³² Therefore, by the end of the war, when southerners faced defeat, and Lincoln freed the slaves, the lives of planter families, and women in particular, changed in profound ways.¹³³

¹³¹ Anastasia Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women's Organizations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 1-5.

¹³² For a discussion on the origins of the Civil War see, Charles Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: South Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001); P.D. Escott, *Major Problems in the History of the American South*, Vol.1 (Lexington: D. C. Heath, 1990); Jeffrey Rogers Hummel, *Emancipating Slaves, Enslaving Freemen* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996); Brian Holden Reid, *Origins of the Civil War* (London: Longman, 1996); William Link, *Roots of Secession* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

¹³³ For a discussion on Reconstruction see, D.T. Carter, *When the War was Over...* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985); J.S. Ezell, *The South Since 1865* (New York: Collier- Macmillan, 1963); John White, *Reconstruction after the Civil War* (London: Longman, 1977) & Alan Farmer, *Reconstruction and the Results of the American Civil War* (London: Hodder & Stroughton, 1996).

Southern women increasingly understood that in waging war, men had failed in their promise to protect them. They had been left as defenceless women, to manage in a whole raft of new roles. In this context, old notions of male authority and female submission and dependence started to slip away. Slaveholding women, whose position as southern ladies had hinged on patriarchal authority and the presence of slavery, the vagaries of war helped to break down traditional gender roles. In connection with this, planter women who were single had stepped out from the shadows, and clearly demonstrated their willingness to fulfil the Cult of Single Blessedness. They took on additional roles and responsibilities in wartime that highlighted their valid place in southern society. The old stereotypes of the redundant old maid who was a drain on her family and community gradually died out. Instead female singleness was perceived as a positive good or a blessing to southern society that had come into sharp focus in the war years.

In this sense, the war had sped-up and highlighted certain changes in single women's lives that were already afoot in the Old South. In the war years and during the years of Reconstruction, an increased number of women were single. Many women had become widows during the war, other young women coming of age simply decided not to marry if they did not find the right partner. This linked to the burgeoning of the new ideal of marriage that encouraged women only to marry for love and affection. A combination of these factors meant that the construction of femininity in the post-war period had shifted in order to reflect the social, demographic and economic changes that had occurred in the South. As notions of single blessedness slowly transfused old stereotypes of social scorn, the war further revised and expanded traditional gender conventions.

As Jennifer Lynn Gross rightly points out, single women were offered a new "portrait of exemplary feminine wartime behaviour" in the model of single blessedness

that developed and matured in the post-war years.¹³⁴ By the time of the war's end in April 1865, single women's lives had altered considerably. Not only had they taken on new roles and responsibilities inside and outside of the household, but they were also called upon to revise their identities as women in order to adapt to the challenges of war. Old notions of female dependency were revised in the light of the Confederacy's demand for women's assistance on the home front, and as women stepped up to the new challenges of wartime responsibility, they also re-shaped other's perception of them as respectable and useful single women. The war brought into sharp focus the fact that many southern women were now single, mostly through non-marriage and widowhood. In the post-war years a new generation of single women continued to emerge. They had successfully built on the foundations of their past, in the antebellum era, during the war, and now into Reconstruction.

¹³⁴ Gross, "Lonely Lives are not Necessarily Joyless," 33.

Chapter Two: Single Women and the Southern Family

This chapter focuses on single women and their position within the southern family. It explores the idea that family lay at the core of a women's identity, defining them in their relationship to the wider community. Many scholars argue that family was an important prism through which women gleaned a greater understanding of themselves, and of their role and function within the antebellum world, and beyond.¹ For planter class women who were single, the family could be a source of support, and an opportunity to prove how useful they were, as well as an avenue to self-advancement. Conversely, some single women found their responsibilities in the family a burden. At times it was an unwanted responsibility that they endured because of a sense of duty. Women's attachment to "usefulness" often reproduced gender roles, which enhanced the perception of their femininity in southern culture. This helped to reshape traditional notions of femininity in the pre-war South, and inadvertently resulted in advancement in female autonomy.²

There has been considerable interest focused on the role of the plantation mistress, but less concentration has been devoted to the role of the single woman in the planter class family. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to closely examine the role of single women in the southern family from 1830-1870. To what extent did their various roles and occupations replicate traditional race, class and gender conventions, or conversely, in what

¹See, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's, "Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South: Sarah Gayle and Her Family," *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family and, Marriage in the Victorian South* ed. Carol Bleser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 15-32; Eugene Genovese, "Our Family White and Black": Family and Household in the Southern Slaveholders' World View in Bleser, 69-88; Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984); Orville Vernon Burton, *In My Father's House Are Many Mansions. Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina*, (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 104 -148 & 260-314; Christine Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness, Unmarried Women in the Urban South, 1800-1865* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 65-95.

² Anne Byrne in "Negotiating Singleness" argues that "interdependence could be fruitful, indeed indispensable" for single women, and that is could lead to autonomy. See Anne Byrne, "Negotiating Singleness," in Rudolph M. Bell & Virginia Yans eds., *Women on Their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 6.

ways did they diverge from them? How important was the Civil War to generating a changing sense of self in the family for single women in particular? Did notions of femininity, such as the Cult of True Womanhood, keep unmarried women under control or, act as a launch pad for new autonomy and self-construction? Much of the focus in this chapter will be on the late and never-married woman, although there will also be some discussion on widows, or women who were separated, abandoned and divorced. The chapter is structured into two main sections: the southern family and single women's roles and responsibilities in it. It highlights the importance of the Cult of Single Blessedness as a guiding force in unmarried women's lives that prompted them to be useful. This reproduced gender roles but also opened up new opportunities for single women even before the war, but certainly during it, and in the post-bellum era.

The Southern Family

As Orville Vernon Burton emphasised in his study of Edgefield, South Carolina, "White Southerners were an especially family-centred people."³ They even spoke of their slave family, and, in doing so perpetuated the myth of benevolence and contentment in slave life that flew in the face of criticism from abolitionists. It can be difficult to pin down a specific definition of the nineteenth-century southern family as it was always evolving. It was a product of its time in so much as it reflected the patriarchal structure of southern society during the antebellum period, and yet it had moved towards the 20th century 'norm' of a 'nuclear family' (a household comprising parents and dependent children), as opposed to an extended family which may contain a wider network and more than two generations, in the post-war years. Scholars have often described the family as "an inclusive" rather

³ Burton, *In My Father's House*, 104.

than an “exclusive institution,” in that the family extended “beyond the customary boundaries to embrace more than blood kin, common colour, or those of equal status.”⁴ Jane Turner Censer describes it as a fluid “process” or as an unfixed entity.⁵ The family, therefore, can best be understood as a flexible entity – an amalgam of various family members, who passed in and out of the family circle by birth, death, remarriage, widowhood, or divorce.

The family defined women as part of a larger collective that bound them together as much as race and class divided them. Women of the upper-class had a special role to play in southern society and as such they were upheld as paragons and representatives of ideal womanhood and femininity that the lower classes aspired. Eugene Genovese and Jane Turner Censer both discuss how slaveholders used the “ubiquitous phrase” of “our family, white and black,” to refer to their white kin and their slave property. Its roots went back to colonial times “recurring constantly in the slaveholders’ private diaries, letters and correspondence.”⁶

Censer also sheds light on the way that the planter class “emphasized the persistence of the metaphor of family as appropriate representation for various social relations,” that supported race, class and gender hierarchies.⁷ If this argument is followed to its logical conclusion, the southern family extended far beyond the traditional parameters that might be ascribed to it today. By adopting the language of the family in their wider discourse, southerners knew their place in the antebellum world. The family, therefore, ties in with

⁴ C. Vann Woodward, *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family and Marriage in the Victorian South*, edited by Carol Bleser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), xxi.

⁵ Censer, *North Carolina Planters*, xiv.

⁶ Genovese, “Our Family Black and White,” 69.

⁷ Censer, “Sarah Gayle and Her Family,” 18-19.

the previous chapter on the construction of identity, and will further inform on the way that gender conventions were either replicated or repelled in the family context.⁸

The antebellum southern family was structured around the central figure of the mother who was revered and respected as a true woman, because she had fulfilled her duty through marriage and motherhood. Married women were seen as having automatically fulfilled the social requirements expected of them, in a way that single women had not. However, it is worth noting that even if a woman later became widowed, she was often still held in high esteem, because she had proven her willingness to conform to the gender conventions required of her, even if she remained single hereafter.⁹ Never-married women faced a more difficult task in proving their commitment to the same ideals. As discussed previously, the rise of the Cult of Single Blessedness did much to help the image and status of the unmarried woman.

Northern writer Catherine Maria Sedgwick was an unmarried woman who famously wrote *Married or Single*, which reflected her thoughts on marriage. In 1834 she wrote, “Married life is the destiny Heaven has allotted to us, and therefore, best fitted to awaken our powers, to exercise our virtues, and call forth all of our sympathies.”¹⁰ Mary Kelly in her analysis of Sedgwick’s work concluded that by elevating marriage to such a high status, Sedgwick was “automatically ascribing an inferior status to the unmarried woman, despite her protests.”¹¹ Sedgwick also stressed the need for women to be useful, another key requirement of the Cult of Single Blessedness, and the idea that in order to be fulfilled

⁸ Jane Turner Censer describes how the “Family figured as a central metaphor for southern society as a whole – for the personal and societal relations through which individuals defined their identities and understood their lives.” Ibid.

⁹ Amy Froide, *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005).

¹⁰ Maglina Lubovich, ““Married or Single? ”: Catharine Maria Sedgwick on Old Maids, Wives and Marriage,” *Legacy* 25:1 (2008), 23.

¹¹ Ibid.

as a woman, it was important to prove her usefulness as a means of gaining external affirmation or self-worth in a male dominated society. In 1854, Sedgwick claimed:

As slaves must be trained for freedom, so women must be educated for usefulness, independence, and contentment in single life . . . as a mode of life in which one may serve God and humanity, and thus educate the soul, the great purpose of this short life. So considered, single life would not long be regarded as either helpless, joyless, or ridiculous,” and that dreaded stigma, “old maid,” would soon “cease to be a stigma, and in the lapse of ages possibly become obsolete.¹²

Again, it is interesting that Sedgwick draws a parallel between race and gender, likening the position of slaves needing training for freedom, and women likewise requiring education and direction in order to attain usefulness both inside and outside of the family unit.

As has previously been explained, single women were told that they could still achieve usefulness by committing themselves to doing good deeds for others, and by focusing their attention on the service of their extended family or community. In this light, single women attempted to replicate the behaviour of true womanhood in their service and contributions to their families. On the face of it, it would seem that there was no acceptable place for the unmarried woman who fell outside of this remit. Catherine Clinton argues that southern “culture provided no primary role for unmarried women [and they were forced to] devote themselves to their parents, nieces and nephews, and in general provided supplemental care whenever required within the kinship network,” due to a lack of available options open to them.¹³

In reality, the roles of unmarried women were far more complex than that, and they often *chose* to integrate themselves within their extended family, from which they gained credibility and self-respect. Single women honed a sense of identity from their various

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 85.

roles within the family, which, whilst constraining at times, could also be used to unmarried women's advantage to expand their sphere and gain a measure of personal autonomy, albeit within certain limitations.¹⁴ Marina Oshana describes autonomy as “not [being] forced to do the will of another.”¹⁵ If this definition is used as a benchmark, then the overall picture is far more complex than Clinton suggests, and one that showed elements of both agency and constraint in the everyday lives of single, slaveholding women in the southern family.

Single, slaveholding women's roles and responsibilities within the family unit can best be explored by examining three main areas: their role as the dutiful daughter or family helpmeet, in their role as the maiden aunt, and lastly in their relationships with siblings. Single women's relationships with other members of their family were rarely one-sided. Though they were single, unmarried women seldom lived alone (or, as Joyce Broussard terms them as *female solitaires*). Family frequently surrounded them, and more often than not, they lived with other close family members fulfilling various capacities. They often shared reciprocal relationships with kin based on a structure of interdependence and mutual aid.

These women held key roles within their birth families, which cemented, and strengthened, the bonds they had with parents and siblings. Family members often held them in the highest regard due to the unparalleled servitude and support, which they provided to their families in spite of being single. The question of whether or not single women were expected to place family above their own desires, or whether they simply made this choice for themselves regardless of societal pressures will be explored

¹⁴ Marina Oshana describes autonomous persons as “beings in actual control of their own choices, actions and goals,” and as, “The person in possession of de facto power to govern himself.” Marina Oshana, *Personal Autonomy in Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2006), 3.

¹⁵ Ibid.

throughout this chapter. It is a central question that lies at the heart of this thesis, which stresses agency over constraint.

Due to the fact that unmarried women were not tied to a husband, or dependents of their own, they were more frequently called upon, often without much prior notice, to come and help in the service of the family compact, or simply when additional assistance was required. As they commonly lived with relatives, they had an ease of mobility that married women did not share, in the sense that they did not have a home or a family of their own to care for, and they were therefore able to spend extended periods helping in other people's families. This sheds light on Catherine Clinton's observation that unmarried women were seen as a free labour pool to be drawn upon by other family members, as and when required, which placed them in high demand. Theirs was often an invisible vocation that helped shape and tend to the flexible family unit. Plantation families depended upon a working force "its ranks filled with daughters, sisters, and other unmarried females," but there is much evidence to suggest that single women also felt a tremendous pull and desire to be part of that extended family unit, as it often brought them great joy and self-satisfaction.¹⁶ Unmarried siblings tended to show – on the surface at least – that they were willing participants in the family circle, not least as a means of gaining acceptance and respect from others who lived amongst them and, on whose good opinion they counted.¹⁷ This leads on to the second section in this chapter that examines the roles and responsibilities of single women in the family. The role of the family helpmeet was one of the key roles that defined single women's identity in the family.

¹⁶ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 38.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Roles and Responsibilities

Family Helpmeet

On February 1st 1853 Margaret Cameron received a letter from her cousin Adelaide praising her for the support she had provided for her family, and especially to her father, during his ill health, and in the final hours before his death.

To think how many blessings you have and the means of doing good. In helping those around you – do look above this world and then you will be comforted. What a blessing that you were able to attend to your Father to the last, in that you were at home, surrounded by all your family and friends, who were able to give assistance when required.¹⁸

Cameron, the eldest daughter of the slaveholder Duncan Cameron and his wife Rebecca Cameron of Orange and Durham Counties and Raleigh, was a single woman in her thirties who had filled the role of the family caregiver or helpmeet, tending to her younger siblings and to her father since her mother's death ten years before.¹⁹

As the eldest unmarried daughter, it was expected that Margaret would take over the mantle of responsibility as the family matriarch in the absence of her mother, thus replicating gender roles, and emulating the mother's care that she would have given had she still been alive. Even when Margaret announced that she wanted to marry her long time beau, George Mordecai, it was a request that was temporarily blocked by her father, who was unwilling to give her up whilst he still needed her. By refusing to consent to the pair's marriage, he effectively demonstrated the limitations of his daughter's free will. As Jane Turner Censer contends "elderly Duncan Cameron did not wish his mid-thirtyish daughter Margaret, who managed his household and cared for her invalid sister, to marry George W.

¹⁸ Cousin Adelaide to Margaret Bain Cameron, 1 February 1853. Cameron Family Papers, The Southern Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina (hereafter cited as SHC).

¹⁹ Margaret was one of eight children; Mary Anne, Thomas Amis Dudley, Paul Carrington, Margaret Bain, Rebecca Bennehan, Jean Syme, Anne Owen, and Mildred Coles.

Mordecai, a banker of Jewish descent. Still, Cameron, who cited “domestic” reasons for his refusal, took no steps to guard against Margaret’s marriage in his will drawn up shortly after.”²⁰ Therefore, it was not that he was against her marrying per se, but simply that he was against her marrying during his lifetime, as he not only relied on her but also needed her to manage his affairs. In the light of this information, cousin Adelaide’s praise takes on a whole new meaning, as Margaret’s desire to marry was usurped by her father Duncan Cameron’s own agenda. Immediately after his death, Margaret, aged forty-two, married George, and the pair remained happily married until he died in 1872.

Throughout their adult lives, Margaret and George devoted considerable time and energy to their extended family networks, reinforcing the stereotype of the supportive sibling and family caregiver. Margaret maintained a close and loving bond with her siblings, particularly with Mildred Coles, which is well documented in the Cameron Family Papers. Even though the couple never had children of their own (except for one stillbirth) they demonstrated much care and compassion to their birth families. Margaret continued in her role as family caregiver to her unmarried sister Mildred, who suffered from poor health and paralysis. George also showed care and compassion in his familial relationships, particularly with his unmarried sisters Ellen and Emma Mordecai. When his brother Moses died in the 1830s, George shouldered the responsibility of providing for his widow, Ann Lane Mordecai, who he lived with and served as a guardian to her children. When his sister, Rachel Mordecai Lazarus was widowed, George again assumed familial responsibility, becoming the legal guardian to her children.

Therefore, what is clear is that single women (and men) took their roles and responsibilities very seriously within the family, even if it was not strictly speaking, their own. It demonstrates once again, the fluidity of the family unit in the nineteenth century

²⁰ Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Families*, 81.

South, and re-iterates the key role of the family helpmeet or dutiful daughter within family circles. Christine Carter referred to the “dutiful daughter” in her critique of single women and the family in Charleston and Savannah.²¹ She evokes images of usefulness, servitude and selfless contribution to the family that again show the way that single women’s roles often replicated traditional gender roles. These roles tied to the “servant ideal” – the idea that single women could find fulfilment and purpose by serving the patriarchy. Single women were able to affirm their self-worth by devoting their lives to their parents, siblings and, wider community.²² Carter revealed how single women flourished in their roles as dutiful daughters, single siblings and maiden aunts in the urban centres, and were far from disadvantaged in their roles. These women tended to be effective when it came to balancing their commitments to the family circle with other commitment including friendships and work.²³

Another example of a single woman who contributed to her birth family was Mary Susan Ker. The Kers were a slaveholding family from Mississippi who lost much of their wealth during the Civil War. This had a profound effect on all them, made worse by the fact that their patriarch had died some years earlier, followed in the Civil War by their mother’s death in 1862. Their story was compounded by economic problems. During the war the family had also made a series of unfortunate wartime investments and the family had been left almost penniless which must have been a shock to a generation who had grown up alongside luxury and wealth. For Mary in particular, her childhood expectations would have been of growing up to become a plantation lady – marrying and having a family of her own, with slaves and servants to do the bulk of the household work for her, leaving her to tend her children and to nurture her family’s every need.

²¹ Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness*, 65-95.

²² Ibid.

²³ For further information, see Michael O’Brien (ed.), *An Evening When Alone: Four Journals of Single Women in the South 1827-1867* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 1-7.

Therefore, when the slaves left by the end of the Civil War, this dream of becoming a plantation mistress fell into tatters, along side the model of ideal ladyhood. By the war's end and the destruction of slavery, the Ker family became representative of what was known as the genteel poor – a hitherto wealthy slaveholding family who were torn asunder by the vagaries of war. Destitution bred insecurity in employment, lifestyle, and family relationships. The Ker men, accustomed to traditional patriarchal roles and well established gender stereotypes, were frustrated by their economic impotence as well as seeing their wives, daughters, and sisters struggle for subsistence in a way that they never thought possible. Across the South countless women had lost male relatives or lovers in the war, others had started to lose faith that their men could protect them at all – all of which led to the re-shaping of family boundaries, groups, and individual roles.²⁴

For Mary Ker, the youngest unmarried sibling, the situation was no different. The death of her mother in 1862 had plunged Mary into new and uncharted territory. With the family matriarch gone, the mantel of responsibility was passed on to Mary, who did well shouldering her new role. First, she managed the family business, second, she supported her brother by selling her treasured silver that provided additional money for him to buy land, and third, she took on the responsibility of raising her brother Lewis' two daughters, which will be discussed in the section on the maiden aunt. Furthermore, Mary also took on formal employment in order to support herself and her two young charges that again will be explored fully in the later chapter on work. In doing so, she proved to be a “A fine specimen of the noble class of old maids who in addition to their professional duties, cared for two generations of orphaned nieces and great nieces.”²⁵ Mary Ker was in many ways an inspiring woman, who showed tremendous resilience and adaptability where other

²⁴ Mary Susan Ker Papers, SHC & Amy L. Holley, ““But One Dependence”: Mary Susan Ker and Southern Public Education, 1876-1914,” (master's thesis, University of North Carolina, 1989).

²⁵ Kemp Plummer Battle, *History of the University of North Carolina from its Beginning to the Death of the President Swain, 1789-1868* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton Printing Company, 1907), 107.

members of her immediate and extended family regularly faltered. She not only relied on her own judgement but other family members relied on it too. Consequently, she crafted new and important roles and responsibilities for herself and she represented the glue that held the family together. Though single, she demonstrated her unwavering commitment to the family unit and her strong desire to keep the family together, as reflected by her as determination to become the guardian for her brother's children.

Likewise, Narcissa Josephine Varner, or "Joe," as she was commonly called, was an individual who greatly contributed to the family unit. It was a role that also led to self-fulfilment and one that acted as a springboard for greater personal autonomy. The youngest child in a large family of thirteen children born to Edward Varner and Cynthia Fitzpatrick on June 17th, 1837, Josephine grew up as a typical planter class daughter in Jasper County, Georgia, where the family remained until their relocation to the Indian Springs, Georgia in 1850.²⁶ Josephine's early childhood years were spent living on the family cotton plantation, and she, like her brothers and sisters, received a good standard of education in Georgia and Tennessee at Eatonton Female Academy and LaGrange College that led her to a teaching career in her early adult life. In 1849, her father purchased the Indian Springs Hotel in Butts County, Georgia, and this is where Josephine spent the majority of her adult life.

Josephine loved home and family but reported mixed feelings when she spent time apart from them when she was away teaching in her early adult years. On the one hand she relished the freedom that came from living on her own but on the other, she also missed her family and often craved for the closeness of the family compact. This is reflected throughout her personal journal. On April 21st 1863, in the height of the Civil War, when Josephine was about twenty-six years old, she wrote, "It may be wicked, it may be weak,

²⁶ The Inventory of The Edward Varner Papers 1730-1965, Georgia Historical Society (hereafter cited as GHS).

but I greatly enjoy being mistress of my own movements. If I am to steer my boat alone all through life, God grant that I may do it cheerfully, as I feel that I can now do.”²⁷ Her choice of words is interesting and reflects commonly held ideas on gender. She uses the words “wicked” and “weak” in describing the enjoyment she felt in “being mistress of my own movements.”²⁸ In admitting her enjoyment, she also recognised that she was challenging traditional gender roles, which dictated that women should be dependent and deferential to male authority. It was not considered ladylike to be “mistress” of your own movements, hence her admission that she was “wicked.” Two short years later, at this stage writing at the end of the war, her sentiments shifted considerably, and all talk of being mistress of her own affairs and manager of her own destiny melt away, as she describes her uneasiness living away from home and family, no doubt intensified by the fact that her anxieties were heightened during war time. “I am almost sick at heart that I ever left home, even the smallest thing I do cast me a struggle, sometimes I heartily wish I had never left home,” she admitted.²⁹

Clearly, Josephine was a woman of mixed emotions – of considerable highs followed by periods of depression, as substantiated in her private journal. Her personality coloured her perceptions of the world and the way she saw it at different stages in her life course, making her view her single status on one day liberating, and constraining the next. These fluctuations in mood are less evident in her personal correspondence, where she tended to conform more rigidly to the conventions of Victorian letter writing (in itself a sign of conformity). Yet, when she was sitting alone, penning her thoughts in her private journal, she was more at ease to mention the inner conflict that she felt between the role expected of her, and the conflicting emotions she harboured sometimes in reference to them.

²⁷ Josephine Varner Diary, Varner Papers, GHS.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 2 February 1865.

This dichotomy between constraint and autonomy was often hidden behind closed doors, and rarely discussed, in line with gender conventions, but on occasion it surfaced in single women's private journals. At times, Josephine, and single women like her, must have inhabited a difficult world, isolated by their perceptions of how things were, contrasted to how they would prefer them to be. It was during these dark moments that women drew strength from the familiarity of the home and family. Joe Varner is a good example of a single woman who chose to make a life for herself within her family, in spite of sometimes feeling pulled outside of it, rather than having the role imposed on her against her will. She, much like Mary Ker, seemed to view her role within the family as very much a vocation in life, and she found great comfort and well being because of her connections with her immediate family. She revealed on February 23rd 1863, "I love them all so much. This short life time, judging their hearts by my own, we love each other strong enough to last forever and ever."³⁰ At several key points in her diary Josephine refers to the close relationship with her family, especially to her mother and older sister, Amanda Varner, who also never married.³¹ When her mother went through a period of ill health, she fretted, "Ma is not very well tonight. The whole world might be sick but it would not give me half the uneasiness as it does for Ma to be the least ailing," once again reflecting the strong maternal bond shared between them.³²

Throughout her life, Josephine invested much time and energy into her relationship with her parents, providing her mother with round-the-clock care when she became seriously ill, right up until her death in December 1881. On the night her mother died Josephine described the scene: "She sat before the fire, ate a good supper, enjoying it so

³⁰ Josephine Varner Diary, 23 February 1863, Varner Papers, GHS.

³¹ Family members used the metaphor of a stream to describe the relationship between the two sisters. When Amanda Varner died aged eighty, her cousin wrote to Joe Varner that, "You live running along like two sweet and useful streams – side by side down the slope into the shadows and now into the sunlight," and referred to their "long and beautiful association together." Cousin to Joe Varner, 15 April 1915, Varner Papers, GHS.

³² Josephine Varner Diary, 1 January 1865, Varner Papers, GHS.

much. I was ready to get in bed, when she said, ‘what a pain is in my right shoulder.’ I said, ‘turn over’ and she did. I took her in my arms and she never breathed again.”³³ In memorialising the scene of her mother’s death, Josephine depicted her mother as “lovely and as sweet as a white flower,” and herself as, “a baby child.”³⁴ Josephine’s description is typical of a deathbed narrative, in which she painted her mother as serene and pure as a “white flower” and describing herself as a “child” dependent on her mother’s care even though her words are contradicted by the fact that she is tending to her mother’s needs, and providing her with the love, care and support that was typical of the role of the dutiful daughter or family caregiver.

The Maiden Aunt

A second key area that defined single women in the family was the role of the maiden aunt. Lee Chambers-Schiller discusses how changes to the family in 1820–1850 affected single women’s status, and their role in providing childcare within the family unit.³⁵ As the rearing of children became an increasingly female centred occupation (which held the mother at the centre), single women were also expected to play their part in caring for children within the family unit. As unmarried women had far fewer ties, it should come as no surprise that they were regularly called upon for their help to raise nieces and nephews, either on a short-term or long-term basis. Americans increasingly believed that the “mother heart beats in all women” and that “women were born to love” regardless of their marital status. This revelation meant two things: first, it greatly increased single women’s workload, and second, it significantly enhanced their status (but not necessarily their

³³ Josephine Varner Diary, 15 December 1881, Varner Papers, GHS.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Lee Chambers-Schiller, ““Woman is Born to Love”: The Maiden Aunt as Maternal Figure in Ante-Bellum Literature,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* Vol. 10:1 (1988): 34-43.

power) in the family.³⁶ The perception of single women as being ‘superfluous’ began to die out as unmarried women were increasingly seen as an integral part of the southern family unit. This is important because *all* women were suddenly seen as having a maternal instinct, regardless of whether they were married or single (in other words they were born with it, and it was part of the natural physiology of women) and consequently, women did not have to be married in order to be considered a true woman.

A woman’s contribution to the family as a maiden aunt or as a caregiver could, in theory, grant her similar privileges to a married woman by her demonstrating her servitude. It links back to the earlier point that single women could potentially re-align themselves with the traditional nineteenth-century ideals of womanhood, by showing that they were committed in their servitude to others. The so-called servant ideal bridged the gap between, conventional ideals of femininity and, the Cult of Single Blessedness, and it was more mutually inclusive, and less bound by marital status.³⁷ Advice author Margaret Coxe advised unmarried women to “take to your heart with fond affection, the offspring of your beloved brothers and sisters, and in their sweet caresses and tender love experience a happiness only second to a Mothers.”³⁸ It is interesting though that Coxe, like Sedgwick before her, emphasised that the happiness that single women experienced in loving their nieces and nephews was “second to a Mothers,” and therefore she denigrated it, and also reinforced existing hierarchies based on marital status.

Maiden aunt Sarah Cecil recognised that she would always play second fiddle in the family regarding any decisions made concerning her nephews. Sarah noted that she was “extremely anxious” that her nephews attend school in Northampton, but at the same time she knew that any authority she had in relation to the boys upbringing was limited to pleas

³⁶ This is a reference to Lee-Chambers-Schiller, “Women is Born to Love.”

³⁷ Broussard, “Female Solitaires.”

³⁸ Margaret Coxe in Chambers-Schiller, “Woman is Born to Love,” 36. Note how Cox places mothers first and single women, second.

and persuasion. She clearly knew her place within the family hierarchy and seldom tried to question it.³⁹ Margaret Williford, a thirty-five year old single woman from North Carolina exhibited similar fears when it came to her nephew, Olly, who she had been caring for since his mother's death. She became alarmed on hearing that his father (her brother) had decided to re-marry for fear that her role as maiden aunt was in jeopardy. In a letter to her own mother, Margaret confessed, "As long as my dear little Olly is mine, I feel satisfied, but it would grieve me to death to be separated from him."⁴⁰ Margaret's confession makes plain an important truth, which was that as much as single women's role in the family was valued and of service to others, it was still perceived as ranking below the status of a married woman, who was both a wife and mother.

Single women may have privately voiced their dissatisfaction regarding this matter, but they rarely challenged the existing status quo, and therefore simply replicated pre-existing gender norms. Margaret Williford stated that "I do not believe any mother could love a child more than I do him," and she may have been right, but it was an opinion that did little to challenge, or alter the existing social hierarchy.⁴¹ Fortunately in her case, her brother's wife, Carrie Holmes, turned out to be a kind and sympathetic sister-in-law who shared her sentiments that Olly and Margaret should remain close, which quickly reassured Margaret of her permanent and lasting position in the boy's life.⁴² In fact, in their situation, the pair became close friends as well as sisters, and Carrie Holmes came to rely heavily on Margaret later on in life when she was widowed. However, Margaret's anxieties do highlight the precarious position that many single women found themselves in; maiden

³⁹ Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness*, 83.

⁴⁰ Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness*, 84.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² In fact the relationship between Carrie Holmes and Margaret Williford was so good that Holmes came to rely on her heavily. Holmes admitted to Williford's Mother, "You must not ask to have Maggie at home with you very soon, I cannot let her go, she really seems like an own sister to me, than any one I have ever met. I love her dearly." Margaret permanently moved in with her brother and sister in law, caring for Olly like a Mother and assisting Carrie who miscarried twins in 1850. She remained with her sister-in-law when she was widowed in 1858, and she proved to be a tremendous source of support to her for many years.

aunts may well have been more respected because of their role in the family unit, but this did not equate to being any more influential, and they also understood that their happiness remained dependent on the decisions of other family members who ranked more highly in the hierarchy than they did.

The maiden aunt possessed little in the way of legal rights over the children and thus found that she was largely reliant on the good will of other family members in keeping to their verbal agreements. Mary Ker was a maiden aunt from Natchez Mississippi. In 1864, she took on the care and responsibility of raising her two nieces, Mamie and Nellie Ker, after her sister-in-law, Jane Percy, died unexpectedly. Mary must have felt some anxiety concerning her long-term position regarding the girls when she adopted them in 1867. In an attempt to overcome this obstacle, she tried to formalise her legal authority in a written document. She had a lawyer draft, an admittedly non – binding but specific resolution that stated that her brother relinquish all rights to his children to Mary, therefore granting her with parental like authority. It read, “I, Lewis Baker Ker, do hereby promise my sister Mary S. Ker, that she shall have the charge, keeping and complete control of my children, Mamie and Nellie, so long as she wishes to do so, and she is not to be interfered with in the exercise of such charge, by any person or persons.”⁴³

Several points require addressing here. Whilst the drafting of a legal document specifying her ‘complete control’ or the transfer of complete control to Mary from her brother may have instilled confidence in Mary that she would not lose the two children at some future date (such as if her brother Lewis remarried), the resolution remained, as described, as a non-binding agreement “between relatives.” The rights that Mary (and other maiden aunts in the same position as her) had been promised remained intimately tied to her brother and the relationship Mary shared with him rather than based on any firm

⁴³ Frank Shaw to Mary Susan Ker, 30 October 1867, Ker Papers, SHC.

legal foundation. It was therefore emotionally draining not knowing if and when your services would be required as a guardian, and Mary did all she could to pre-empt the situation, although inevitably she was still subject to the higher authority of her brother's wishes.

In December 1871, Mary took further measures to formalise the relationship she had with her nieces, this time drawing up a will that divided her property between them. Mary averred, "I have made this disposition of my property according to my judgement and feelings combined," in a manner which typified the way in which many southern women dealt with wills in general, in a far more personal manner than men.⁴⁴ Her tendency to be swayed by personal preference or favouritism of towards certain individuals was typical of the way in which she reacted to situations within the family and at work. It extended to Mary's response to matters when she worked at school, to her students and management of the wider family.⁴⁵

A clear example of this was in the way she conducted her relationship with her grown up nieces, Mamie and Nellie. Most obviously, Mary favoured Mamie over Nellie and responded to each niece accordingly. In May 1894, Mary confided in her diary, "I have lost every spark of affection for Nellie, since her visit to her dying sister at Moore's Station. I cannot help her and do my best not to think of her one way or another. Poor Nellie, how I pity her!"⁴⁶ Her intense disapproval of Nellie, sparked by the events around the time of Mamie's death is clear throughout her diary. Undoubtedly this was a source of friction between all three women, as Mary pitted the sisters against each other, which must have made Nellie feel extremely inadequate even after her sister's death. Mary deified her even more so after she had died, with entries in her diary reflecting on her love for

⁴⁴ Memorandum Mary Ker to Mamie and Nellie Ker, 10 December 1871, Ker Papers, SHC.

⁴⁵ Suzanne Lebsock, *The Freewomen of Petersburg, 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984), xxii.

⁴⁶ Mary Susan Ker Diary, 11 June 1894, Ker Papers, SHC.

“darling Mamie” who was “constantly on my mind,” whilst at the same time ignoring Nellie, who desperately needed her reassurance at this stage.⁴⁷

The death of Mamie Ker, rather than signalling the close of one chapter in Mary’s life as a maiden aunt, in fact re-opened it. Just as she had freed herself from the financial, practical and emotional constraints of raising one generation of Kers, Mary took on the fresh responsibility of bringing up Mamie’s two daughters, which must have riled Nellie, who was at the time struggling with an alcohol addiction, depression, whilst trying to look after her own children. Yet, Nellie received short thrift from Mary at every turn. Mary’s story is therefore not clear-cut. On the one hand she devoted herself to the family compact, and devoted her time and energy to her nieces and grandnieces, but on the other, she seemed to pick and chose who she devoted the most time and attention to, according to her own preferences.

Mary clearly felt overburdened at times, taking care of the girls (both the first and second generation), and she found it trying having to teach long hours in order to afford their care. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that by the time Mary took on the care and responsibility of raising her grandnieces following Mamie Ker’s death, that the task must have seemed Herculean to her, for she knew what was expected of her, she had done it before. Yet in spite of her grief, and the knowledge of what the task entailed, her response was typical of that of a maiden aunt, as she showed immediate concern regarding the welfare of Mamie’s children. On April 19th 1894 she penned in her diary that “My heart and mind were so absorbed in what to do for the five children left motherless – the same as homeless – almost the same as fatherless – entirely moneyless – that I could think of nothing else.”⁴⁸ Death had once again stepped in to disrupt the course of Mary’s life and in

⁴⁷ Ibid., 13 May 1894.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 19 April 1894.

spite of her necessity to return to work and continue her professional duties as a teacher she had already invested emotionally and practically in the fortunes of Mamie's children.

Mary was forced to take the children to Natchez and to split them up to live with various relatives, yet she remained determined to prove she was capable of raising two of the girls, Catherine and Tillie, quickly finding the job and the accommodation to do so.⁴⁹ Mary in her grief demonstrated the tenacity of a single woman dedicated to her goal of bringing up her beloved niece's children. Her devotion to the girls surpassed the role of family caretaker and Mary worked steadfastly in her vocation as a teacher in order to provide their practical, social, and educational needs.⁵⁰ In spite of her intermittent protests that raising Mamie's children was a "cruel experience" that she was forced to endure, on other days she spoke of how having them with her enabled her to keep going when she worked in difficult teaching posts that she did not enjoy.

Her diary makes it clear that she found the task of raising her grandnieces a mixed blessing, she adored the children but, nonetheless, they were still a tiring and exhausting occupation for a woman on her own, particularly when she grew older. Added to this, they were not her own, nor her sole occupation, she continually struggled to juggle full-time employment, mostly teaching or sometimes working as a governess, living and working in other people's establishments and operating according to their rules and requirements, rather than being master of her own time. Her residential living arrangements were often temporary, and she had to always prove that she was doing a satisfactory job, in the hope of securing longer-term employment, which Mary found stressful and taxing on her emotions, often causing her to become run down and ill. Yet, when help was offered, Mary rejected it, and she showed dogged determinism to manage on her own, with minimal

⁴⁹ Mamie had five children: Albert, Mary, Matilda, Catherine and Percy.

⁵⁰ In September 1894 Mary joined the staff at Mrs. Blake's school in New Orleans where she remained for a year.

assistance from others. Perhaps then, this was an indication of her drive for personal agency, even though she most probably would not have considered it in this way herself.

Her life had developed in directions she would have never imagined it would. Like many other slaveholding families, the Civil War had materially altered the social dynamics of the Kers' lives and stripped them of their land, property and slaves. That is what makes Ker's story so important. It is indicative of the experience of many other unmarried women from planter families in the mid 1860s, who suddenly found themselves in tightened economic circumstances due to the exigencies of war. In the antebellum period, unattached planter class ladies would have been discouraged from teaching and other forms of employment, they simply did not have the necessity to do so, and they would have been seriously discouraged from doing so as well. However, the Civil War led to permanent alterations in the economic set-up of many slaveholding families, who were simply not as wealthy as they had once been. The huge shifts in the make-up of the southern family caused by the death of husbands, brothers and sons, also increased the likelihood that a woman would be single, and also that her services would be in high demand both inside and outside of the family unit. Plato's famous dictum, "Necessity, who is the mother of invention," has particular relevance in this case – as women, married and single, were propelled to take on new roles during, and also after the end of the Civil War.⁵¹

Mary, and her generation of single, slaveholding women took on the mantle of child-care in the service of their extended families, predominantly out of a sense of duty to the southern family. Single women often prescribed to the same ideals of southern womanhood as married women did and they wanted the acceptance of society in the same way as if they had married. Just because they did not have husbands or dependents of their own, it did not mean that they were any less committed to the ideals of the southern family

⁵¹ Plato, *The Republic*. Plato's phrase was also used in the title of Drew Gilpin Faust's book, *Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War: Mothers of Invention* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

that represented the bedrock of the South. Historian, Joyce Broussard referred to this commitment as the “servant ideal;” it allowed women (from all social classes) to fit into the wider hegemony of the South by demonstrating their servitude and commitment to the “larger patriarchal order of life.”⁵² In other words, women were able to by-pass social, racial and class barriers that typically barred single, lower class, or black women from obtaining the mantel of true womanhood. By pledging their devotion to the more universal ideals of submission, honor and paternalism, they gained respectability where ordinarily they would find themselves shut out.⁵³

The maiden aunt provided much in exchange for the reward of familial intimacy and a good reputation. She could counterbalance a mother’s shortcomings and her unique position within the family, “offered instruction while maintaining perspective and balance her moderation provided a check on maternal weakness.”⁵⁴ Mary Telfair proved this point exactly. Following the death of her brother Thomas, and coupled with her lack of faith and rather low opinion of her sister-in-law, who was now a widowed mother caring for two children, Mary stepped in and took charge of her nieces, Mary Eliza Telfair and Margaret Long Telfair. Despite Mary’s status as an unmarried, single female, Mary deemed it her responsibility to actively intervene in the care of her two nieces, who she believed were being raised inadequately by her sister-in-law. In this scenario (and others like it) what is most astonishing is that Mary, as a single woman, had both the power and influence to control the situation, even though she fell outside of the immediate family. Perhaps it was Mary’s wealth and family connections, or her strong, even pushy persona that enabled her to infiltrate their lives? What remains clear is that her pattern of interference was not an isolated case. In 1839, Mary again intervened when she took charge of her grandniece,

⁵² Broussard, “Female Solitaires.”

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Chambers-Schiller, “Woman is Born to Love,” 35.

following her parents Pierce Cobb and Mary Eliza Telfair Cobb's deaths. Mary practically adopted her grandniece, raising and educating her as if she were her own.

However, even Mary was to discover the limitations of her position as the maiden aunt. In spite of Mary's authoritarian nature, she was still plagued by the anxieties that accompanied the role of the maiden aunt like so many other women in this study were. In frequent streams of correspondence to her closest friend, Mary Few who lived in the North, Telfair highlighted the difficulties of raising other people's children within a wealthy, slaveholding southern family. In a letter Telfair wrote to Few she admitted, "It is not necessary to be a Parent to feel the responsibility and anxiety of one," reaffirming Chamber-Schiller's argument that the "Mother heart beats in all women."⁵⁵ In another letter, Mary spoke of the constraints and limitations placed on her in her role as the maiden aunt, which are illuminating given the manner in which she rode rough shod over the feelings of her sister-in-law after her brother Thomas's death.⁵⁶ It demonstrates the insecurity that all single women must have experienced when it came to their role as the maiden aunt or surrogate mother.

Even when it came to apparently minor decisions, such as whether or not the girls should be sent north to continue their education, Mary was simply not consulted on the matter, leaving her feeling isolated and insignificant. As she confided in Few, "We feel the delicacy of our situation and cannot urge what we wish," which highlights the vulnerability, but also the limitations of a single women's role in the family.⁵⁷ As Mary's case demonstrates even the wealthiest and most well connected slaveholding women found that their own autonomy was circumscribed within existing gender hierarchies when it came to their role as maiden aunt.

⁵⁵ Betty Wood (ed.), *Mary Telfair to Mary Few: Selected Letters, 1802-1844* (The University of Georgia Press: Athens and London, 2007), 93 & Schiller, "Woman is Born to Love," 35.

⁵⁶ Betty Wood (ed.), *Mary Telfair to Mary Few*, 62.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

The details of each individual story whilst distinct collectively illuminate general trends or patterns, that reveal a great deal about single women's relationship to the southern family. Even in a few exceptional cases, where slaveholding women came from extremely wealthy families, who retained wealth during, and after the war, such as the Telfair's, the maiden aunt still found that her role was limited by the paternalistic structures of a male-dominated world. Yes, single women were able to gain respect from acting out the servant ideal, and by demonstrating service and submission to the extended family, but respect did not equate to personal agency, or control of certain situations.

Even though, women like Ker and Telfair may have devoted themselves tirelessly to the care of their brother's children in their role as maiden aunt, it was a role that replicated the tenets of true womanhood, and continued to hinge on the wishes of higher male authority that did little to challenge existing feminine ideals or gender hierarchies; it tried to be part of them in an effort to gain acceptance in a male –dominated world. Stemming from this observation, it would seem that single women gained little in terms of growing independence in the family unit, at least in their role as the maiden aunt. This is not to say that unmarried women did not gain any personal autonomy in the family, but rather to suggest that they were simply expanding agency within the existing class, race and gender hierarchies that were already in place.

For some unmarried women the role of the maiden aunt was very much thrust upon them when they least expected it. This was the case for Ann Lewis Hardeman, a forty-six year old spinster from central Mississippi, who after years of living alone with her brother, sister-in-law and ageing mother, was suddenly commandeered to take charge of her sister's six children. In early 1849, giving birth to her last child, Ann's sister, Sarah Stuart fell desperately ill and died, leaving behind six children and an irresponsible husband whom she knew would be incapable of raising their children alone. Safe in the knowledge that her

sister was a reliable woman, Sarah in her wisdom asked that Ann take on the responsibility of bringing up her six children: James, Oscar, Adelaide, Annie, Elizabeth, Edward and Sarah-Jane. It was a request that shaped the rest of Ann Hardeman's life. "Suddenly the spinster aunt of 46 had become a sort of mother. She had no money of her own, was never to have money of her own [and she] lived upon the charity of her brother and sister-in-law," which further eroded her self-confidence, independence and personal autonomy.⁵⁸

Ann was in no position to refuse and grudgingly took on the responsibility that accompanied her new role as surrogate mother to her sister's children. Similarly, she often spoke of occupying the middle ground when it came to her relationship with the children. She makes it clear in her diary that she occupied a rather shadowy existence within the family unit, and she often described her position as being compromised by her shared living arrangements with her brother and sister-in-law, as well as her restricted financial independence. This spilled over in the way she disciplined the children as she found her strong-willed sister-in-law regularly interfered with how she disciplined the children. Mary tried to share parental responsibility with Ann and in so doing diluted her authority, making Ann appear indecisive and at times weak. Although she spoke with great kindness and warmth regarding her relationship with her brother William, she found that her position as surrogate mother was continually undermined by the presence of her sister-in-law, Mary Hardeman. Michael O'Brien described her as a "stern, authoritative woman", "watchful of her status", and "chilly in her formality."⁵⁹ Evidently, she was a cold, domineering woman who at the same time occupied the centre of the family and she was a woman to whom Ann played second fiddle, rendering her meek and ineffectual by comparison.

⁵⁸ Michael O'Brien (ed.), *An Evening When Alone*, 32.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

Ann nonetheless forged strong and lasting bonds with her surrogate children. Her daily entries in her diary revolve around the children's routines and later as the war begins, she emits her anxiety for her nieces and nephews safety onto the imprint of her daily entries. Hardeman's domain was narrow and so too was her work. Though she evidently worked hard, she clearly lacked the authority (or confidence) of a true disciplinarian. The home and domestic sphere was all she knew and she struggled with slave management. In July 1850 she lost control of her temper due to a slave's "insolent" behaviour. "I will try to regain my balance – anger is majestic- but makes *slaves* of weak minds," she says checking her self after the outburst.⁶⁰ For the most part Ann remained well intentioned illustrated by the manner in which she cared for the slaves and their offspring. Her maternal nature also extended itself to the children, who Ann often reported to be sick with whooping cough, chickenpox, colds, and scarlet fever. In a typical entry on July 8th 1850 Ann writes, "Our dear little Jane has been quite ill of Diarrhoea for a fortnight. Looks badly – but on balance doing tolerably well – Adelaide improving – Betty can spell."⁶¹ Her time was dominated by caring for them; monitoring their progress with schooling and ensuring they attend church.

When the children grew up, matured and left home, Ann missed her former responsibilities, and continued to worry about each of them, particularly when the boys left to fight in the Civil War. In December 1860 she writes, "This Christmas is lonely for me having only two of my dear ones with us," a reflection of how much she enjoyed, and missed her surrogate family.⁶² Her feelings of isolation grew stronger as the journal progressed, with the emergency of secession and the coming of war; Aunt Ann sinks into a deep depression. As Michael O'Brien observed, "She sat in her room, aging and alone, nursing her health and trying by force of prayer and will to preserve the children she

⁶⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁶¹ Ibid., 8 July 1850, 222.

⁶² Ibid., 6 December 1860, 314.

loved,” but to no avail. This picture of Aunt Ann reveals a complicated image of a single woman – on the one hand ageing and alone and on the other, of a woman deeply attached to the grown children she has raised. This was not a woman who regretted the role thrust upon her, but an individual who through adverse circumstances, came to relish her identity as a maiden aunt to her dead sister’s children, despite of any personal constraints that her position placed upon her.

Ann’s lack of personal autonomy and her rather diluted sense of self within the family compact, must not detract from the fact that her role as a maiden aunt enabled her to enjoy a good life because of the relationships she shared with her nieces and nephews. Ann may not have chosen her fate as a surrogate mother but she certainly seems to have benefited because of it. She may have lacked the fiery independence of Mary Ker, or the economic advantages of Mary Telfair, but she nonetheless shared certain traits with single women who were also maiden aunts. Ann Hardeman was certainly not an autonomous woman; in fact she found the process of decision making an almost unbearable challenge. However, what Ann represented was evidence that single siblings were perceived of as ‘reliable’ women who could be trusted to hold the family together, particularly in times of crisis. Ann, and women like her, often found an inner strength, which allowed them to overcome daily constraints which they were faced with within their own family, and to ultimately prove that they were worthy care givers.

Mary Helen Johnson stepped up to the challenge of raising her sister Anne Moodie Waring’s five children, after her death in 1836. In order to be of use, Mary moved in with her brother-in-law, William Waring, and by doing so proved again how the family could be refashioned in order to adapt to new and altered circumstances. Unlike the case of Mary Ker who single-handedly provided for the care and financial cost of raising her nieces, Johnson was in a better financial position, as her brother-in-law provided for his family’s

economic well being that took some of the pressures off his sister-in-law's shoulders. Mary Ker had also been given plenty of offers of support, but had chosen to reject them. Her brother in Port Gibson (who was also a teacher) had asked Mary on several occasions to come to live with him and his wife Josie, stating "If you insist on being independent, I think this would suit you much better than the life you have been living," but she had rejected them because the offer had not extended to her bringing the children to live with him as well.⁶³ Mary Ker preferred her limited independence with all of the stresses that it might bring, in contrast to a life where she would have to rely on anybody else or give up on her promise of caring for her nieces or grandnieces. On the one occasion that she did move in with brother William and Josie (due to her brother's ill-health) she argued incessantly over her lack of privacy to focus on her preparation for work, and her sister-in-laws lack of appreciation for who she was and what she represented.

Not all single women had the same gumption and fiery independence of Mary Ker. Some lacked the wherewithal to manage alone or to secure a job in order to support themselves and their young charges. Others had little motivation to pursue employment as they came from wealthy aristocratic families that sheltered them from the necessity of working for a living (for example Mary Telfair and Mary Few). Yet, these distinctions notwithstanding, what this section has shown is that "the mother heart beats in all women" and single women were often as dedicated to domesticity and the family unit as their married counterparts were, even if this was simply to gain acceptance and respect within the family unit.

After all, if single women were willing to take on the responsibility of raising other people's children, surely they deserved some recognition for their efforts, even if they were thrust upon them? Single women therefore demonstrated their commitment to the family

⁶³ William Henry Ker to Mary Susan Ker, 4 February 1878, Mary Ker Papers, SHC.

by taking on various roles within the family circle. So far, two roles have been emphasised, the role of the family helpmeet or dutiful daughter and secondly, the role of the maiden aunt. The third, and final section that will be explored in this chapter is sibling relationships.

Siblings

This section is loosely divided into two parts: sororial bonds and fraternal relationships, although naturally, there will be some overlap, as with other sections as it is impossible to look at either in isolation. The bond that sisters shared was a special one, but the tie that bound unmarried sisters appeared to be greater still. There are many examples both before, during and after the Civil War where unmarried sisters or widowed relatives lived together in clusters – some were never married, others had become single through widowhood, but they often came together in pairs or groups, and shared homes, families and responsibilities.

The Holladay family were from Prospect Hill Plantation, Spotsylvania County in Virginia. Waller Holladay and his wife, Huldah Fontaine Lewis Holladay had six daughters, five of whom were unmarried (as well as some sons) at the time of Waller's death in 1860. The daughters were well provided for in their father's will, and they each received what would have been considered a traditional provision of being granted permission to live together in the family house, that had been passed on to their brother in their father's will. It stated: "To my single daughters I give the right to reside in my dwelling house with their brother James M. Holladay if they wish it, so long as he may be the owner of it. In the event of the marriage of any one of them, the right, to such one,

shall cease.”⁶⁴ There are two key points raised here. First, the girls were given the right to live together in a female dominated household, but, second, their autonomy remained checked by their brother, who ultimately owned the house, and therefore they were subject to own desires as to if he wanted to keep it, or sell it on. As single siblings living together, they may well have shared in a camaraderie and special relationship, but even that was subject to the ultimate authority of their brother, that bound them to the patriarchal order even though they had not married.

The Holladay sisters were fortunate, in that they shared a good relationship with their brother, but also between each other, on whom they each depended. These girls, or grown women, as they actually were in 1860, were intimately tied to each other, and their letters show they did not want to break this tie, even when their parents died. Long before their father's death, in the spring of 1848, Eliza Holladay penned a letter to her cousin Elizabeth Travers Lewis in which she confessed her anxiety over the possibility that her unmarried sisters *might* someday marry and break up the intimate sororial circle shared amongst them. “We have always lived so happily together that I should almost be afraid of any of us to get married for fear that we would not be so happy afterwards, when separated from each other,” Eliza admitted nervously.⁶⁵ For Eliza, and other single women living in a similar situation to her, her sisters represented an essential part of her life and they were the embodiment of what the southern family meant to her. Fortunately her sisters also shared in her sentiments, and none of them ever married, and they all lived together on the family plantation throughout the course of their adult lives even though other options were available to them.

⁶⁴ Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 113.

⁶⁵ Eliza Holladay to Elizabeth Travers Lewis, 22 May 1848, Holladay Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society (hereafter cited as VHS).

Having lived together for over thirty-two years, the sisters were loath to alter their living arrangements after their parent's death. The ties that bound single women like Eliza Holladay to their birth family were ones that transcended childhood and kept siblings together on a far more permanent basis. As Eliza freely confessed to her cousin Bet, "I always feel so miserable when I have been from home for any length of time without any of my sisters," adding that her parents would not like to be parted from their children either adding, "of course we cannot do so, so long as they object to it" reflecting a pattern of mutual interdependence.⁶⁶ The fact that Eliza and her sisters continued to live in the parental home, even after their parents passed away is itself proof that the decision to remain at home was a conscious decision rather than parental constraint.

Single women often clustered into female-headed households, or lived in female only residences. Historian Glenda Riley describes these relationships as a subtle subversion of southern culture in reaction to the patriarchal rule in the nineteenth century South.⁶⁷ Unmarried sisters, who lived together, particularly after a parent's death, provided company and support to one another, and typically shared these households. Some particularly good examples are the Varner sisters, Amanda and Josephine, who lived together for over fifty years. The pair maintained a strong and successful partnership, collectively managing the Varner house, a family hotel located in the Indian Springs. This well-respected pair was well known in the vicinity and they were addressed in much the same way as a married couple might be. They had gained respect in their successful management of the family business and they were often consulted for their advice in the local community. Rather than being considered as an oddity, these women were highly valued for the important contribution they made in the Indian Springs area. After Amanda Varner's death in 1915 (thirteen years prior to her sister Josephine) an obituary paid

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Glenda Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition* (New York: University of Oxford Press, 1990; reprint, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

homage to her, highlighting the fact that she had been “a devoted companion for a great many years,” to Josephine. Friends and family also acknowledged the importance of their relationship and wrote letters of sympathy to Joe Varner expressing their sadness for her, knowing how “lonely” Josephine must feel without her closest companion to help guide her through life.⁶⁸

Sibling pairs were not uncommon. Angelina and Sarah Grimké were sisters who spent a lifetime living together. Even after Angelina’s belated marriage to the anti-slavery campaigner Theodore Weld in 1838, the sisters remained living under one roof. The Grimkés were an infamous duo – daughters of the slaveholding judge from South Carolina, the pair were exceptional in their early distaste for, and abhorrence towards the institution of slavery despite of their southern roots. In 1819 they fled to Philadelphia, and later to New York, where they became the first women to lecture for the Anti-Slavery Society.⁶⁹ Their shared opinions on women’s suffrage and abolition bound them together as one, and resulted in a lifelong commitment to activism. Further examples of sibling pairs living together in all female households included the Edmundson sisters of Montgomery County in Virginia. Mary Rebecca and Sally Munford were unmarried sisters who had been provided for in their father’s will. In a contracted agreement, the girls were each paid one hundred dollars per year to support their living arrangements, which had been one of the conditions of their late father’s will administered and paid for by their brothers, David Edmundson and William Radford Edmundson.⁷⁰

Clearly, sibling relationships, when they were strong and durable provided an enviable source of support to unmarried women. Several case studies demonstrate the

⁶⁸ Henry E. Hutchens to Josephine Varner, Washington DC, 5 April 1915, Varner Family Papers, GHS.

⁶⁹ In a speech in March 1838, reported in the newspaper, *The Liberator*, Angelina spoke about her reasons for leaving the South. “I stand before you as a southerner, exiled from the land of my birth by the sound of the lash and the piteous cry of the slave. I stand before you as a repentant slaveholder. I stand before you as a moral being.

⁷⁰ Edmundson Family Papers 598a 998-1006, section 28, VHS.

advantages of living in a sibling pair, such as Hannah and Susan Wylie from South Carolina. The girls offered each other a lifetime of companionship; they also retained a close bond with their late-married sister Mary Mobley. In fact when Mary became ill, it was Susan who rushed to Mary's aid irrespective of the fact that she was unwell herself. On October 6th 1857, she dashed to her bedside, "and there gave her unwearied attention" to her dying sister. In a strange twist of irony, Susan then became "dangerously ill" and the sisters died within a day of one another. Susan Wylie was described in her obituary as a person one had to "admire," and it also stated that, "her faults were but few and were overshadowed by her virtues," (note, however, that it does refer to her as having faults, perhaps a slight at her single status?) "She was the bedside attendant of the sick, the comforter of the bereaved, the friend of the oppressed, and the personification of benevolence, charity and virtue."⁷¹ This highlights the way 'womanly virtues' were upheld as important attributes in a society that valued piety, purity, submissiveness and care giving. Though she was single, the carefully crafted words in her obituary homed in on these 'womanly virtues.' There is no mention of the qualities that really set her apart; her fiery disposition, tendency for outspokenness and independent spirit, that were loved and accepted by all her family – but these would not have been considered appropriate attributes in a nineteenth-century obituary.

After the devastating loss of both her dearly loved sisters, Hannah Wylie continued to show her resilience, hardiness and resourceful character. She maintained a close relationship with Mary's widower, William Mobley, who held Hannah in high regard, repeatedly trying to persuade her to move out West to Mississippi to be closer to him though there does not seem to have been a romantic connection between them. In his frequent correspondence to her, he tells her how much he misses her friendship and good

⁷¹ Obituary, 6 October 6 1857, Gaston, Strait, Wiley and Baskin Papers, South Caroliniana Library (hereafter cited as SCL).

advice and he worries about the effect her sisters deaths has had on her. “Hannah, I often think of you sitting alone brooding over your great bereavement,” he writes. “I think if I were with you I could comfort and sustain you some in your troubles, as I know you could with me – if ever we get near each other again nothing, so far as I am concerned, shall part us.”⁷² The relationship between single women and their male relatives, especially their brothers was at times powerful and strong, and often, prior to marriage at least, single sisters acted out the role of a pseudo-wife to their brothers, without the sexual dimension of marriage.

Fraternal bonds were another vital relationship that could either make or break a single woman’s fortune, in terms of how well she was supported, where she lived and, how she was perceived by family members. The importance of the fraternal bond has been discussed in the case of the Holladay sisters and the Munford sisters. In this section, further examples will be used to illustrate the reciprocal relationship between brothers and their never-married or widowed sisters. George W. Mordecai’s life, as recorded in his letters and diaries, provides an illuminating insight into the support single women sometimes received from their fraternal relations. George proved to be a loyal and supportive brother to his sisters, as well as to other members of his immediate family. He often praised Emma Mordecai, his never-married sister on whom he could rely on, for not only taking care of herself (which she did admirably through her role as a teacher) but also, in the care that she provided for their sister, Caroline Mordecai Plunkett, who was widowed in 1824.⁷³

Caroline had returned to the family home in Richmond during an extended period of ill health (she had a nervous disorder) and during this time it was Emma who cared for her.

⁷² William Mobley to Hannah Wylie, 12th November 1859, The Wylie Papers, SCL.

⁷³ The Mordecai Family Papers, SHC. Caroline was born in 1794 and died in 1862. She married Achilles Plunkett and the couple had three children, all of whom died in infancy. Achilles died in 1824, leaving Caroline as a young widow. During her widowhood she tried, unsuccessfully, to run the family academy in Warrenton. She taught her brother’s children before opening a small school in Mobile, Alabama. Eventually she moved back to the family home in Raleigh. After a turbulent period of bad mental health she was institutionalised in an insane asylum where she eventually died in 1862.

Unfortunately, the situation did not improve, and Caroline was so unwell, and her mental state so unstable that she eventually required hospitalisation in an insane asylum. However, Emma Mordecai remained stoic, and whilst the situation at home must have put her under enormous pressure, she remained upbeat and dogged in her determination to assist in the family compact. Emma also cared for her sick mother, Rebecca Myers, who died in 1863. During this period, she remained undeterred in her pursuit to do “good” despite the daily constraints placed on her. After her death she threw herself into war work at a nearby military hospital, using the skills she had developed in the home caring for her sister and mother, by putting them to use for the good of the wider community. Her personal story resonates with a wider audience because it tells of a well-trodden journey that took many single women from the domestic sphere into the workplace, caring for soldiers or doing other useful work, particularly during the war.

Emma remained deeply committed to her birth family; she shared a communal living arrangement with her brother George, his wife Margaret, and their sister-in-law, Rosina Ursula Young. Rosina was a widow, who suffered from poor health. Emma often supported Rosina during times of sickness and offered support to the wider family unit. As a single woman, Emma Mordecai was a rock of support to several members for the family, but especially to her brother who could count on her reliable and steadfast manner. A parallel can be drawn between the resourcefulness and strength of single women like Emma Mordecai, with other less able, vulnerable women, including widows Rosina Young and Ellen Shutt who shall be discussed shortly. Paul Cameron could also rely on his sister Margaret (George’s wife) and vice versa.⁷⁴ Sibling relationships were not always as easy as

⁷⁴ This again supports the idea of the collective family and the reciprocal nature of late and never-married women’s relationships with their siblings. For example, in a letter from Emma to George Mordecai on November 18 1844 she expresses her deep affection for her “guardian brother” George for whom she had the “tenderest gratitude”. “Never, my dear brother, can I forget all that you have suffered for me and all your noble and touching kindness to me”. Microfilm Series Southern Women and Their Families, Davis Library, GMP 522, Reel 6.

theirs. Brothers or other male relatives were not necessarily forthcoming in helping disadvantaged female relatives in troubled circumstances; nor were unmarried or widowed relations always as reliable or independent as Margaret or Emma, thus giving us a more nuanced picture of agency and constraint within the southern family. This is a point that is highlighted even within the Mordecai family.

One character who frequently appears in George Mordecai's personal correspondence is his niece, Ellen Lazarus Allen Shutt, who was widowed after her first husband (John Allen) died in 1858. Ellen personifies the stereotype of the desperate widow, who was left financially destitute after her husband's death, with several children to support. John Allen had never been good with money and the couple were seldom prosperous even when he was alive. Following his death, nothing had been settled regarding his limited estate and Ellen, right from the outset, proved to be both needy and on occasion, manipulative in sourcing money from George. Rather than expressing a desire to be independent, Ellen regularly turned to her Uncle for advice and financial support. Even when she was offered money from her sister, she refused it, and explained to George that, "I feel assured you would prefer my continuing to make known my wants to you, to resorting to my sister or any other source. Is it not so?"⁷⁵ Her continual reference to George in all domestic and financial matters was more common than we might otherwise assume, and she constantly re-enforced her need for a male patriarch to replace her husband. She was unwilling to take on advice from anyone else or to trust her own judgements, instead relying on the good nature of Uncle George to solve all of her familial, financial and legal problems. In Ellen's case, the indoctrination of appropriate gender roles and behaviour had a lasting effect, and prevented her from developing a voice and direction of her own,

⁷⁵ Ellen Allen to George W. Mordecai, 30 August 1860, George. W. Mordecai Papers Microfilm Series, Davis Library, Subseries 1.2.4 1861-65. Reels 10 and 11.

which negated her personal autonomy as she constantly reached out for protection and provision from an alternative figure of male authority.

In the period after the war, Ellen Shutt's affairs dominated George Mordecai's personal correspondence and it must have been not only frustrating, but also time consuming for George, though he seldom discussed his feelings on the matter. Ellen wrote him long letters detailing her hardships during the war. For example, she recounts the sorry tale of how her family had experienced such dire financial straights that she foolishly apprenticed her daughter Minnie and son Urner (now Ernest) to the Shakers for fear that she would not be able to support them as a woman on her own.⁷⁶ It was a decision that she regretted but seemed unable to reverse. She claimed that the Shakers used "deception and treachery" to persuade her to give the children up, and in her letters to George she badgered him for advice on how to get the children back.⁷⁷ Ellen would often make poor decisions without any consultation with her Uncle, and then in a panic, try and get him to reverse the action she had put in motion. The Shaker story is a good example of this; her eldest daughter Minnie had no desire to leave the sect, but Ellen eventually managed to rescue Ernest.

Ellen Shutt's predicament highlights several points: the vulnerability that some single women encountered, particularly widows who were used to having a male protector. Second, it shows how important a single woman's personality was in coping alone, and the value that she placed on having an extended family to turn to. Ellen Shutt was fortunate that she could rely on the support of her Uncle George who was more than accommodating during her times of need. At the same time, the ease of having a male figure to turn to negated any need for her to foster new skills of self-sufficiency. In many ways George

⁷⁶ The Shakers were a religious sect that formed in eighteenth-century England. The group is marked by their monastic, communitarian life, which was devoted to preparing the way for God's will to be carried out on earth. For further information see, Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (Yale University Press, 1992), 1-8.

⁷⁷ Ellen Lazarus to George Mordecai, Brentwood, 23 March 1868, George Mordecai Papers, SHC.

replaced his father as the family patriarch when his father died and he frequently demonstrated his on going commitment to upholding his role in the family on numerous occasions. Independent historian, Emily Bingham observed how family came first to the Mordecai clan, regardless of each member's marital status. Each member "grounded their identity in and found their place in the world through service to the family" and single siblings were no exception.⁷⁸

In the Cameron household the ethos was much the same. Siblings Margaret and Paul Cameron from Orange County, North Carolina demonstrated their continuing commitment to their family throughout their lives. The fraternal bond, which they shared, was a constant source of support that was reflected in their personal correspondence over the years. When their father, Duncan Cameron was dying in March 1853, Paul wrote to his sister, "I wish it was in my power to go to you in this time of need, I know I would be a comfort to you," which indeed he was.⁷⁹ Even after Margaret married George Mordecai in 1854 the sibling pair continued to rely on one another for emotional and practical support. Margaret was able to trust and confide in Paul regarding her deep attachment to their family, safe in the knowledge that he echoed her desire to be constantly present for their siblings (which links in to the earlier section on the family helpmeet). In regards to their sister Mildred (who suffered from neuralgia and partial paralysis) Margaret felt a special commitment. She confessed to Paul, "I sometimes think that it is my duty to take her to Philadelphia for medical aid," following a particularly severe bout of ill health and spasms for Mildred.⁸⁰ It was in the dialogue with her brother that Margaret felt at ease to express her innermost thoughts and concerns; a sentiment that never diminished throughout their lifetimes. The strong fraternal and sororial bonds that existed between many siblings

⁷⁸ Emily Bingham, *Mordecai: An Early American Family* (New York: Hill & Wand, 2003), 42.

⁷⁹ Paul Cameron to Margaret Cameron 15 March 1853, Cameron Family Papers, SHC. Paul is referring to the loss of their father and the continued ill health of their sister, Mildred Coles.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

reinforces the ethos of the ‘collective family’ which at its best proved to be a loving, communal and nurturing environment in which single women rooted much of their identity.

Undoubtedly, the fraternal bonds between single women and their brothers were an important aspect of their everyday lives. Whilst not always positive, the significance of the sibling bond remained of fundamental consequence in single, white, southern women’s lives. Unmarried women often poured considerable time and energy into their relationships with their siblings and they were naturally left devastated if their siblings were ill or worse, died. Mary and Margaret Telfair tended to their sick brothers on more than one occasion, firstly to Alexander in 1817, which was a long and arduous duty for Mary, as she spoke of being stuck on a rural plantation, surrounded by Negroes, with only her sister, Margaret for company.⁸¹ Fortunately, Alexander did recover, leaving Mary to reminisce: “I sometimes think that I was endued with uncommon firmness to have gone through what I did, but I was so constantly engaged that I had no time to reflect. I only felt as though my existence hung upon his.”⁸² Her choice of words are illuminating as she describes herself as having an “uncommon firmness,” which in many respects is an unladylike characteristic but one that she seems almost proud of.

In fact worse was to follow, when Mary’s elder brother Thomas died on February 18th 1818, at thirty-one years old, which had a devastating effect on Mary, and turned her world upside down. In her grief, Telfair entrusted her thoughts in the privacy of a letter to her lifelong confidante, and close friend Mary Few. “You knew how beloved was the object I lament, how much I esteemed his virtues, and how I delighted in his conversation; he was Brother, friend and instructor, indeed he was everything to me *and the separation*

⁸¹ Charles J. Johnson Junior, *Mary Telfair: The Life and Legacy of a Nineteenth Century Woman* (Savannah: Frederic C. Beil Publisher, 2002), 49.

⁸² Ibid.

was hard indeed.”⁸³ The separation, of course was a metaphor for death. Mary’s heartbreak over her brother’s death plunged her into extended depression. Nevertheless in time, Mary did recover sufficiently to go on with her life and she re-focused her energies on the care, upbringing and education of his two daughters, her nieces, Mary Eliza and Margaret Long Telfair. She also developed a close relationship with her eldest brother Alexander, who she lived with, with her two unmarried sisters Margaret and Sarah. Their living arrangements reflected the idea of a collective family that flourished on the ideals of mutual companionship and interdependence. It also demonstrated the fluidity of the family unit discussed in the opening of the chapter.

Single women did not have to live alone to validate their desire for autonomy. Records reveal that single women often lived in sibling pairs, or in groups, or as part of a larger family group. In the Mordecai family two distinct family groups had formed separate living arrangements following the death of its patriarch, Jacob Mordecai in 1838. Jacob’s son from his first marriage to Judith Myers headed the first and it was based in Richmond, Virginia. Members of the household included Samuel’s sisters Ellen (1790-1884), Emma (1812-1906), both of whom were single, and Julia, a widow (1799-1852), half-sister Laura, and finally Eliza Kennon (a widow) in 1849. Rosina Young also joined them after her husband died. Rosina suffered from chronic health problems which rendered her unfit to manage her farm, Rosewood, and household alone and she was embraced within the family fold. The second family group lived in Raleigh, North Carolina. George W. Mordecai headed it. The group included Nancy Lane Mordecai (George’s sister-in-law), sisters Harriet and Temperance Lane, Moses and Margaret Lane Mordecai’s children

⁸³ Johnson, *Mary Telfair: The Life and Legacy of a Nineteenth Century Woman*, 49-50.

and in the 1840's, Mary Lazarus. In the 1850's Margaret Cameron married George Mordecai and she joined them along with her invalid sister Mildred Coles.⁸⁴

As these two groups illustrate, the nineteenth-century southern family accommodated various living arrangements that incorporated single women into the fabric of the family. The Mordecai family consisted of men and women of various marital statuses who often pitched in and lived together, as a result of shifting family circumstances including marital breakdown, bereavement, widowhood or re-marriage. These individuals were able to live contented lives, coming together as a family group, yet each willing and able to exert personal autonomy in the way that they choose to conduct their lives. For example, Ellen was a teacher in the family school and later a private governess; she also wrote several books including 'The History of a Heart' which described her conversion to Christianity.

Emma was the family caregiver but after the war pursued a successful teaching career, which her family were evidently delighted about. "I am so glad Emma has occupation which she naturally so much desired," wrote Ellen Mordecai to her brother George on October 16th 1868, "I am very anxious to have a letter from her informing me of everything that I would know if we were together – I am sorry we are so far apart, but if she is prosperous and contented I can find my consolation in that reflection."⁸⁵ In the case of the Mordecai family, each member derived great pleasure from the success and well being of its fellow members, reflecting a strong reciprocal bond of love and concern. For example, when George is unwell, his sister, Emma wrote to him from her teaching post and expressed her concern for him. She stated, "You do not know that everything that hurts you, hurts me – how often I think of your many anxious cares, and how I pray for your welfare and happiness."⁸⁶ This is only one of countless letters between sibling groups that demonstrates the affectionate bond between family members. This also extended to the

⁸⁴ Inventory to the Mordecai Family Papers, SHC.

⁸⁵ Ellen Mordecai to George W. Mordecai, 16 October 1868, George Mordecai Papers, SHC.

⁸⁶ Emma Mordecai to George W. Mordecai, Columbus, 23 April 1869, George Mordecai Papers, SHC.

strong relationship between the Mordecai women and their new sister-in-law, Margaret Cameron, who became quickly integrated into the family circle.

The Mordecai family demonstrate that the Civil War did not act as a watershed for a change in single women's roles in the family, as women had already begun a slow process of gaining respect and admiration from others in the family long before the firing of guns at Fort Sumter. However, for many slaveholding families, the Civil War did mark the start of a long process of decline in their wealth and fortune that by its conclusion seriously affected the wealth and status of some planter families because of the devastation of land, loss of slaves and death of some of its men. How could slaveholding women – married or single – continue to uphold the tenets of ladyhood, if the foundations of slavery, upon which their image was built, had gone asunder?

For the time being the focus returns to fraternal bonds. Not all women could rely so heavily on the solid support of their brothers. Mary Scudder was a never-married woman who had tended to her sick parents for two and a half years. After their deaths, she was shocked to discover that the bonds of mutual dependence, which she thought she shared with her siblings, were on shaky ground. Whilst Mary never regretted the decision to invest the days of her youth in the pursuit of a care-giving role, she openly admitted her disappointment. She had willingly fulfilled her role as the family helpmeet during times of crisis; she often found that she was left isolated and unsupported after the crisis had passed. Mary constantly reminded her brothers of the painstaking care she had taken of their dying parents. Despite this, she discovered that herself and widowed sister were left destitute, without the financial means to live an independent life.⁸⁷

In spite of the fact that it had been her father's last wish that his two daughters be provided for, the reality was that his request were ignored and the girls had to fight for

⁸⁷ Mary Scudder to John Scudder, July 20 1856, Scudder Family Papers, GHS.

what was rightfully theirs. Due to complications in their father's will, that had originally been written prior to ill health, nothing had been specified in writing as to what he intended to leave them. Consequently, Mary's fate had been left in the unsympathetic and greedy hands of her brothers who refused to share out the family estate. Their actions ultimately clipped her wings of independence, (or at least her free choice in the life she may have chosen, or where she might live) and devolved power into her brother's hands. For Mary Scudder and for other single women in her position, the loss that resulted from her father's death was therefore taxing on a number of different levels: emotional, financial and practical. Mary had not only lost her father, whom she had devoted so much time and affection to, but she had also been robbed of any degree of personal autonomy. Her brother had stolen her key to personal independence, and tightly controlled the limits of her private and public life. With limited options open to her, and heavily circumscribed by her own family, Mary eventually decided to accept the proposal of marriage from her suitor Mr. Magie. She exchanged her life as a spinster for the security of a home and future that had been denied to her by her brothers.⁸⁸

It was not unusual for single women to yearn for a place of their own. Northern writer, Catherine Sedgwick spoke of how she had "boarded around so much – had my home in so many others houses and so many hearts.... I have been so woven into the fabric of others, that I seem to have no separate individual existence." This is curious, particularly in Catherine Sedgwick's case, as she forged a distinctive identity for herself as a writer. Yet even in her case she professes that she has 'no separate existence' from her family.⁸⁹ Yet, Sedgwick is overwhelmingly remembered as a successful writer *not* for identity as a

⁸⁸ Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness*, 71.

⁸⁹ Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 1980), 159. For more information on Catherine Sedgwick see Mary Kelley, 'A Woman Alone: Catharine Maria Sedgwick's Spinsterhood in Nineteenth Century America', *The New England Quarterly* 51 (June 1978): 209-225.

family caregiver. Therefore the connection between perception and reality is important in understanding single women's lives within the family context.

No single experience can tell the tale of *all* unmarried women's lives, or of their different relationships with their families. However, certain key points can be drawn from the examples discussed throughout this chapter. Firstly, family was clearly very important in single women's lives and when their relationships with parents, siblings and other family members were good, it made home the most perfect place in the world for these women to be. If these women were happy and contented at home, than this was usually a reflection of the strong sibling support they shared there. Home held a special place for Mary Telfair; she admitted, "Home is the centre of attraction for me and I never wish even for a day to leave it," even though in reality, she also spent extended periods visiting family and friends in the North, including Few, to whom she was writing. Few surely understood the sentiments of Mary's statement. The point was that Mary valued home and family deeply. Here, she felt at ease, and of importance. Thus, by telling Few that she did not want to venture far from home, she was placing a high value on this important element of her life. After returning home from a particularly lengthy trip to Philadelphia, Mary confided in Few again, "At home, I am a very important personage and I am never happy separated from my family for any length of time." Yet, she also recognised, the pitfalls of such an arrangement, qualifying her earlier statement, adding: "I doubt whether this state of mutual dependence is not more productive of more misery than happiness," because of the necessity of spending time apart.⁹⁰

Josephine Blair Harvie from Amelia County in Virginia was another single woman who felt equally devoted to her family. During her time teaching in 1852 Josephine wrote regularly to her mother regarding her desire to return home; "Is home the same pleasant

⁹⁰ Wood, *Mary Telfair to Mary Few*, 48-49.

place that it used to be? Or is it changed at all?" she questioned. "I feel that if I could only get there I should be the happiest person in the world." It was in the quiet moments of sitting alone, far from home, that 'home' took on the rosiest hue. "I feel very low spirited indeed in my solitary room, my thoughts are far from here, they are at home that sweet far away place," she mused.⁹¹ Home for Josephine was a sacred place; it was familiar, safe and comfortable, a place where she could be true to her self and accepted as such. Connected to this was her strong attachment to her siblings who she took great pleasure in. For example, she could not disguise her regret when she learnt that her brother would not be home for Christmas. In a letter to him she disclosed, "I can't tell you how disappointed I am that you're not coming home. Xmas will not be Xmas for me without you or any one of my brothers or sisters."⁹²

The correspondence between the Harvie family members revealed a close relationship between siblings and the mutual dependence between them. Each member of the family gained something from their relationship with their siblings. When Josephine's eldest brother, Edwin James Harvie was serving in the U.S. Army in Washington Territory, he frequently wrote to his sisters, and confided in them the details of camp life. "I like to share my feelings, happy or unhappy, with my sisters," Edwin wrote, possibly because it helped maintain a feeling of closeness, even though they were miles apart. This argument appears justified by his parting sentiment that "I love you more than I ever did."⁹³ Yet, for other single women, such as Mary Scudder, her key to personal happiness had been stolen by her own brother, who neither valued his sister, nor the residential living arrangements that he effectively blocked off to her.

⁹¹ Josephine Blair Harvie to Sarah Harvie, 30 January 1852, Section 3, Harvie Family Papers 1807-1913, VHS.

⁹² Ibid., Josephine Blair Harvie to Charles Old Harvie, Dykeland, 23 December [undated year], VHS.

⁹³ Harvie Family Papers, VHS.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored three main areas and examined their value and meaning to single women and to their families: the family helpmeet, the maiden aunt and sibling relationships. At the heart of these three roles or relationships lay single women's mission to prove that they were useful. As femininity was inextricably intertwined with 'usefulness' or servitude to the family or to the patriarchal ideal of femininity single women did their best to replicate the role of their married sisters in the commitment they showed to the southern family. If women demonstrated that they were active members of the family circle or of the wider community, it often negated any claim that they were superfluous or redundant women.⁹⁴ In the eyes of Georgian society, Miss Varner had proved her worth through unprecedented acts of usefulness and good works within the wider community that had gained her respect and notoriety. Single women, including Varner, Ker and the Holladay sisters proved that they were indispensable resources – either within the family or as key contributors in the wider community. This prevented them from being seen as a 'drain' on the family and helped to re-construct the spinster stereotype into one of usefulness and indispensability early on in the antebellum era. Usefulness could be achieved in a variety of roles – as the dutiful daughter, supportive sibling, family helpmeet or maiden aunt, or a mix of all of these roles.

Widows could also achieve 'usefulness' by proving that they were acting in the interest of their deceased husbands, an issue which came into sharper focus during and after the Civil War, when so many more women took on the temporary or sometimes permanent roles of deputy husband. In the post-bellum period an increased number of single women became heads of household, mostly out of a desperate need for someone to fill in the positions that their husbands had previously occupied. Stepping into the role

⁹⁴ The Macon Telegraph, 1826, Box 4, Folder 54, Varner Papers, VHS.

because of their husbands' absence (either because they were fighting or worse, dead) was initially an act of pragmatism; women were simply acting in the best interest of the family, rather than challenging gender roles. Though the exigencies of war thrust many women into new roles the fact that this was even possible (and in many ways encouraged) indicates the growing flexibility of the family structure in the pre-war era. The fact that these women were seen as acting in the interest of an absent or deceased spouse, or due to pressing financial or practical needs, rather than in a grab for personal autonomy allowed women to take on roles traditionally reserved for their menfolk.

This links to Joyce Broussard's argument that unattached women could operate as equals to their married counterparts, (or if they became widowed), so long as they demonstrated their dutiful behaviour to the servant ideal.⁹⁵ Even in the post-bellum world, when slavery had fallen and the patriarchal structure started to crumble alongside it, unmarried women were able to appear non-threatening if they operated under the guise of servitude to the patriarchal ideal (even if that ideal was gone). Nonetheless, what is clear is that women were generally accepted in southern society, if they managed to demonstrate both their vulnerability (and need for protection as true southern women), together with their willingness, or service to the body politic. Nineteenth century southern society liked to protect "true southern women" and therefore the family often stepped in to care and protect its own, as will be demonstrated later on in Chapter Five, when the focus turns to the law and property relations.

The question whether or not the Civil War changed the roles and responsibilities of single women in the southern family is again complicated. Certain patterns of dependence were clear in the antebellum period, right through to Reconstruction, and hinged on the bonds single women did or did not share with parents, siblings and other family members.

⁹⁵ Broussard, "Female Solitaires," 21.

However, at the same time, other important changes relating to women's legal standing and property rights were already underway in the pre-war period. The legal debates and legislation that was passed gave some southern women more authority within the family in terms of inheritance and residential living patterns, which offered them a limited but unprecedented degree of autonomy. Attempting to protect some single women through legal means and the changing perception of their legal status becomes an issue that is more clearly recognisable in the post-war period, and certainly during Reconstruction. However, this does not diminish the fact that attitudes towards single women were, for a variety of reasons, slowly altering to favour their circumstances in the antebellum era, a development that an increasing number of southern women would take advantage of during and after the Civil War.

Chapter Three: Work

In the antebellum South, single women's traditional working roles were tied to the home and family that re-enforced the rigid ideologies of true womanhood. Within this context, single women often took on additional roles, such as acting as the temporary head of household, and managing plantations and large numbers of slaves. This inadvertently led to the honing of new skills, an opportunity for self-fulfilment and a chance to prove that single women were useful. The on-set of the Civil War resulted in an increased demand for women's labour, and a temporary expansion of their working roles. The war therefore expedited social change and offered unmarried women new opportunities to demonstrate that they were useful in southern society. This dovetailed with the burgeoning of the Cult of Single Blessedness.

The war acted as a catalyst for change. Many of the temporary changes in women's lives had a liberating effect on them, and led to more permanent alterations in women's lives in the post-war era. Women were also keen to show that they operated within the acceptable framework of their gender, but they also argued that the exigencies of war must allow them some flexibility in the temporary expansion of their roles. As Phoebe Yates Pember, a South Carolinian widow wrote in 1864, "A woman *must* soar beyond the conventional modesty considered correct under different circumstances" because of the necessity of wartime.¹ Pember was referring to the role of female nurses in the context of the Civil War. However, she highlighted an important point that lies at the heart of this chapter, which was that the war acted as a catalyst that accelerated changes in women's working lives that had already been set in motion in the pre-war period. This chapter will

¹ Phoebe Yates Pember, *A Southern Woman's Story: Life in Confederate Richmond*, ed. Bell. I. Wiley (Marietta, Georgia: McCowat-Mercer Press, 1954), 105.

explore the relationship between single women's work and their pathway to enhanced independence. It will focus on three main areas: plantation management, nursing, and teaching. Each occupation has been chosen as it reflects broader changes in women's working roles. The three areas are by no means exhaustive but they each demonstrate the increasing fluidity between the private and public spheres.

Section one will explore the roles and responsibilities of slaveholding women in plantation management, which was closely connected to race and class. Planter class women represented a small minority of white, southern women. They were privileged because of their class and wealth, which set them apart from lower class white females. The fact that they were also single meant that they did not automatically fit into existing models of 'true' womanhood. Yet by emulating traditional female roles in the pre-war period they often gained acceptance in society, which inadvertently led to an increase in self-autonomy.²

Section two centres on nursing, which came into sharp focus during the Civil War. Single women, particularly spinsters or widows without children had the potential for greater mobility in wartime. This was important for women who nursed in the war, as they often had to re-locate to areas where the need was greatest. Women also helped to supply goods for soldiers, through ladies aid societies or benevolence work, or more importantly, acted as caregivers and nurses to Confederate soldiers.

Women, both married and single, were conscious that they must tread carefully in taking on new roles, and if they did justify doing so, even in the context of wartime. It was important that women showed a willingness to conform to the conservative roles expected of them, even if in reality they were overstepping its boundaries and gaining a

² For a discussion on how fulfilling traditional gender roles led to female agency see for example, Joyce Broussard's "Female Solitaires: Women Alone in the Lifeworld of Mid-Century Natchez, Mississippi 1850-1880." (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1998), 12 & 21. For the post-war era see, Jennifer Lynn Gross's "Lonely Lives are not Necessarily Joyless": Augusta Jane Evan's *Macaria* and the Creation of a Place for Single Womanhood in the Postwar South,' *American Nineteenth Century History* 2:1 Spring (2001): 33-52.

degree of independence. Judith Mitchell illuminates an earlier argument by Mary Beth Norton that women “concealed their flouting of convention by subsuming their actions within the confines of womanhood and its proper functions.”³ Mitchell focuses on the life story of Ann Pamela Cunningham, a wealthy southern born, white woman, who was overcame her physical disability and single status, by initiating a “public crusade to rescue the home of George Washington.”⁴ By cloaking her actions in a benevolent guise, and by describing her actions as fitting with a woman’s role, she showed spirit and agency. As Nancy Hewitt noted “Women influenced and advocated change, but they did so within the context of their particular social and material circumstances.”⁵ This links back to Pember’s argument that the social changes generated by war made it acceptable for women to step outside of their sphere of home and family, without being perceived as a threat, or as a challenge to male authority.

Her words resonated with elite, white, women who like her were either unmarried or widowed. These women fell outside of the parameters of ‘true’ womanhood by virtue of their single status. Thus in pursuing war work, many single women wanted to prove that they were useful – as it engaged with the burgeoning of a new Cult of Single Blessedness that measured an unmarried woman’s worth by her contribution to society. Historian Lee Chambers-Schiller suggested that a Cult of Single Blessedness emerged alongside the much-discussed Cult of Domesticity. Schiller notes that it “occurred in the South for women born in 1840-1850, therefore coming to age in the Civil War era and finding new opportunities as a result of it.”⁶ At the start of the war, many southern women married and single felt redundant after having enthusiastically waved their men off to fight. They

³ Judith Anne Mitchell, “Ann Pamela Cunningham: A Southern Matrons Legacy” (Master’s Thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 1993), 11.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nancy Hewitt in Judith Anne Mitchell, “Ann Pamela Cunningham,” 5.

⁶ Lee Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband*, 6.

initially felt uncertain of what role they had in southern society.⁷ As the war gathered momentum, there was a mounting pressure for women to help contribute to the war effort, which eased their concerns and gave them a new purpose.⁸

Section three explores the public arena of teaching. This trend had already slowly begun in the antebellum period, but more often in the privacy of the home and family where single women helped to educate their nieces and nephews, or helped read slaves Bible passages. Others worked as governesses or teachers in the antebellum period, but it was not until the Civil War that teaching became, as one young lady put it, “a vocation rather than avocation.”⁹ Prior to this point, women tended to work as unpaid labourers within their extended families, caring and helping to educate younger siblings or nieces and nephews, in the service of the extended family. In doing so, they conformed to gender stereotypes and demonstrated that they were useful to the family that coalesced with the development of an alternative model of femininity – single blessedness.¹⁰

After the war, teaching became increasingly accepted as a more respectable way in which single, southern women could earn a living without compromising their feminine delicacy, which is evidence of the way that traditional working roles lead to new opportunities and autonomy for women. Single women stressed that theirs was a valid contribution in the nurturing of the next generation, helping to mould young minds into becoming good citizens of tomorrow.¹¹ In the post-war world, an increasing number of single women turned to teaching as a means of making a living. The vagaries of war had

⁷ Drew Gilpin Faust, “Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War,” *The Journal of American History* 76 (March 1990): 1209.

⁸ Edward D. C. Campbell, Kym S. Rice, eds. *A Woman's War: Southern Women in the Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

⁹ Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 279.

¹⁰ For more information on single women's roles within the family see Christine Jacobsen Carter's *Southern Single Blessedness: Unmarried Women in the Urban South 1800-1865* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 65-95.

¹¹ Young girls often aspired to be like their single female teachers, especially during their time in the female academies. Anya Jabour argues that life in the academies led to the development of female resistance to accepting conventional gender roles. Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, Chapter 2, ‘College Girls,’ & 61 & 63.

altered wealthy families social and economic positions, and in the post-war world the additional contributions from unmarried daughters and single sisters became valued.

Plantation Management

Even before the war, evidence suggests that single women managed large plantations when required to do so. Rebecca Pilsbury's husband, Timothy Pilsbury served in the House and the Senate of the Republic of Texas and was absent for long stretches of time when he was a member of the United States Congress from 1846-1849.¹² In his absence, Rebecca Pilsbury, had to take on unaccustomed responsibilities that were extremely taxing at first. In her diary she recorded the new household and farm duties she must attend to in her husband's absence. She noted the new chores were "entirely novel to me" and she described how much she missed the "kindness and support of her husband."¹³

The expansion of her domestic role was arduous to her and she often commented that she was "not designed for a worker." Nonetheless, she was determined to make her husband proud of her, proving that she could manage in his absence.¹⁴ In December 1848, she wrote: "There is a pleasure in doing things you know will meet the approval of those you love, beyond the mere sense of having done your duty, and received the approval of your own conscience."¹⁵ Rebecca Pilsbury's words reveal the importance of gaining external affirmation for her efforts on the plantation in her husband's absence.¹⁶ Paradoxically, in pleasing her husband, she also developed new skills, which made her

¹² Rebecca Pilsbury Diary, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina (hereafter cited as SHC).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20 November 1848.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2 December 1848.

¹⁶ This links to what Joyce Broussard has called the "servant ideal" which is the idea that servitude was an avenue to self-fulfilment and female agency. See Joyce Broussard, "Female Solitaires: Women Alone in the Lifeworld of Mid-Century Natchez, Mississippi 1850-1880." (PhD dissertation., University of Southern California, 1998), 12.

more independent. Virginian Ellen Moore also echoed the difficulties of managing alone without her husband. On one occasion she bemoaned the fact that the slaves “all think I am a kind of usurper and [that I] have no authority over them,” whilst her husband was absent. Her shrewd observation underlines how slaves also recognised the differences between male and female slaveholders, and in some instances helped to replicate existing gender conventions, simply by recognising this.¹⁷ Daily life tested female slaveholders in several capacities. They honed a variety of new skills – including farming knowledge, business management, and dealing with their slaves (including reprimands and punishments).

Thrice widowed, Ada Bacot from Darlington District, in South Carolina recalled in her diary on February 11th 1861, how she dealt with disobedient slaves. As discussed previously, Bacot made it clear that unlike the experience of Ellen Moore, she *would* be obeyed. She also intended to exert control over the slaves regardless of her gender, and in doing so replicated class and racial hierarchies, which channelled power into her hands. Ada Bacot proved that the barriers of her gender could be overcome even when dealing with slaves, if women were from privileged and extremely wealthy backgrounds. Bacot exercised a heightened degree of personal agency, by replicating hierarchies of a male dominated world, rather than transcending them.

Female autonomy in these cases was linked to dominance over others, mostly over slaves and poorer whites, which had already become well established before the Civil War. The power that wealthy widows like Bacot displayed was different from a male slaveholder who tended to brandish authority over his slaves by the use of physical force. Female slaveholders generally avoided physical reprimands of slaves and on the rare occasions that women used physical force to reprimand them, they felt tremendously

¹⁷ Faust, Glymph, & Rable, *Southern Women in the Civil War*, 2.

guilty, almost as if they had tainted their own femininity by reverting to such masculine power traits. Bacot's reaction to slave truancy demonstrated this.

Slave management was fraught with pitfalls. Laura Beecher Comer, a widow from Columbus, Georgia, is an illustration of this fact. On reading through Comer's diary, one of the first impressions the reader gains is that Comer was not a happy woman. She complained incessantly about the slaves, on one occasion noting, "Oh, it is terrible to be weighed down, with a large family of the ignorant creatures! When shall I be delivered from them?" On another occasion she added, these "obstinate creatures" have "consumed 13 of the best years of my life! And I would gladly now be free of them forever! I love my house but it is continually clouded by these wilful and disobedient servants. How much longer can I endure?" Yet, in spite of her hatred of them, she still found it hard to punish them, describing it as "a terrible duty."¹⁸ It was hard for single women to uphold their status as 'ladies,' whilst at the same time getting their hands dirty in the practical day-to-day running of the plantation, which included the punishment of slaves.

As a result, women learnt to tread carefully in an effort to protect their image as both planter ladies *and* single women by showing that they did not overstep gender boundaries, even though in reality they often did. In the antebellum period, widows were keen to show that they adhered to traditional working roles and that if they extended beyond them it was only done so in the interest of their deceased husband. Kirsten Wood argues, as 'ladies' slaveholding women believed they were superior to most of their sex, because of their position in the planter hierarchy. The feeling of moral superiority also extended across gender lines as elite women often considered themselves nobler stock than planter men "in manners, gentility, and piety, qualities that popular opinion deemed white

¹⁸ Laura Beecher Comer Diary, 3 December 1862, Volume 1, January 1862-April 1863 & 2 January 1862, Laura Beecher Comer Papers, SHC.

women's special province.”¹⁹ Supposedly character-based “these assessments invariably reflected class and race privilege” but they also represented an avenue to enhanced independence.²⁰

Many widows understood how the death of a husband marked a critical moment in their personal lives, which forced them into new roles out of the necessity of their altered circumstances. Material resources were an important factor that helped determine a female planter's level of autonomy. Financial difficulties could become a source of considerable restraint in single women's lives. As noted previously, Laura Beecher Comer was dissatisfied with her life as a planter wife living on a cotton plantation in Alabama. Laura, originally from New Haven, Connecticut, married James Comer, a cotton planter from Alabama, in 1848. Her marriage and later her widowhood, were characterised by dark entries in her diary, that reflected her dissatisfaction with the life she had chosen and her lack of options to escape it. Throughout the pages of her voluminous diary she refers gloomily to her unhappy marriage and how she hated living on an isolated cotton plantation in Alabama, surrounded by slaves. “It is a terrible life! Who can appreciate or understand anything about such a life but a woman who marries a bachelor; who has lived with his Negroes as equals, at bed and board! What a life many poor wives have to live in uncomplaining silence,” she fumed in April 1863.²¹ In reality, Laura Comer, was displaying agency by vocalising her discontent and unwillingness to conform. Her story like many others was an illustration of dissatisfaction, but also, conformity. Women like Laura revealed moments of significant personal agency in describing their dissatisfaction with the lives they led, they also conformed by keeping their opinions within the private arena.

¹⁹ Kirsten. E. Wood. *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2004), 4-5.

²⁰ Ibid., 4-5.

²¹ Comer Diary, SHC.

For Laura Comer it was widowhood that led to an enhancement of her personal autonomy. Initially after her husband James died her diary entries remained bleak. Although she did not mourn the loss of her husband, it is clear that she did find the practical realities managing after his death difficult to cope with: “I shudder and shirk from assuming any new responsibilities,” she wrote in 1867, which can be interpreted in two ways. First, that she was unable to cope with any additional responsibilities, or second, that she simply did not want them, thus showing agency in her widowhood.²² Initially widowhood was not as she had imagined it to be. The reality of mounting financial pressures and other anxieties connected to running a plantation imposed additional restrictions on her that she had not envisaged. Liberty and personal freedom were initially not apparent. For Laura Comer, it took time to build up the mental fortitude to free her from the constraints of marriage, and then the practical responsibilities that accompanied her widowhood, which were mostly tied up with managing the plantation, and financial concerns.

Finally, at just over the age of fifty she declared, “I have been a slave to my business affairs too long. I have taken care of others and neglected myself – it is high time I should attend to myself.”²³ In her use of the word “slave” she likened her status as a woman to the restraints of a slave, which links to Catherine Clinton’s observation that all plantation mistresses were bound to the land in the same way as their slaves.²⁴ Yet in widowhood Laura Comer removed these shackles of responsibility, and recognised that it was “high time I should attend to myself,” which demonstrates a burgeoning sense of personal autonomy. In Laura’s third and final volume of her personal diary, her entries are injected with a renewed enthusiasm previously absent in her earlier entries. As she wrote

²² Comer Diary, 28 December 1867. On 6 March 1867 she also writes about her anxiety managing the freedmen, planting, and general tasks on the plantation.

²³ Ibid., 26 November 1872.

²⁴ Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women’s World in The Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 109 & 179.

on June 16th 1872, “A new life seems to dawn upon me,” and it certainly did as she made plans to return to her home state of Connecticut and then travel onward to Europe.²⁵

Evidently, material resources were a crucial factor in determining single women’s scope for personal freedom. In 1800, South Carolinian widow Catherine Edwards, remarked on the connection between wealth and personal agency:

I have lived so long a widow that I no longer find the state a solitary one – besides my children will be greatly benefited by my remaining single and I am desirous to transfer all my good luck to them – Widows in this country are little Queens if they have property – and I have enough to gratify all of the vanity in my heart – have both my country and town house – with a number of servants and an elegant equipage and in addition an unencumbered estate having paid all the debts and this year a great crop of rice.²⁶

It is clear that even at the turn of the century, wealthy widows such as Edwards understood the benefits associated with property ownership for single women. In the South, wealth was invested in goods and property. Therefore, as Edwards’ wisely deduced, property equalled power, and power equated to personal liberty. According to her assessment, the key to independence lay in bricks and bank notes, which accounts for her conclusion: “Let poor widows my dear Sir get husbands but those who are independent have respect enough without them.”²⁷ A woman’s ‘respect’ and ‘independence’ hinged on the procurement of wealth, not marital status, in Edward’s view. Even in the event of widowhood, a woman was able to retain respectability if she could uphold her social or class status (again, the idea of protecting one’s ‘ladyhood’). She could raise authority through her wealth and position, and retain respect by upholding the standards of ladylike decorum. Therefore, as these cases indicate, planter class women who were single were able to overcome the

²⁵ Ellen Lazarus Allen Shutt was another widow who discovered that financial difficulties could lead to personal, social and familial dislocation. For further information, refer to Chapter two.

²⁶ Catherine Edwards to Charles Biddle, 4 July 1805, Catherine Edwards Papers, South Carolina Library, University of South Carolina (hereafter cited as SCL). Likewise, Leonora Whiteside, widow of James Anderson Whitehead inherited a vast estate in 1861. On the back of her excellent management of the estate she was reputed to be the richest woman in Tennessee. Robert Manson Myers, *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972).

²⁷ Catherine Edwards to Charles Biddle, 4 July 1805, Catherine Edwards Papers, SCL.

subordination of their gender by virtue of their wealth that suggests agency in the midst of restraint.

Paulina Cabell Read Le Grand, a wealthy widow and mistress of Edge Hill Plantation in Halifax County Virginia, was proof of how a widow could overcome adversity. After her husband's death, Le Grand employed an overseer to manage her large plantation that freed her from the daily responsibilities of plantation management. In addition to this, she persuaded a friend, William Huntington, to reside at Edge Hill when she was away travelling, which gave her more freedom. In her letters to him, she is authoritative, even demanding, imploring him to, "stay with me, you can read here as much as will be profitable to you and I feel cheerfully willing to compensate you liberally for your services to me and my poor servants."²⁸

The tone of her letters borders on the dictatorial as she clearly expects William to submit to her will, an unusual trait for a woman in the antebellum era. Le Grand takes on the role of pseudo-patriarch and in doing so subverts the commonly held notion of female dependency. Her wealth enabled her to broaden her domestic sphere to such a degree that she flouted all notions of feminine inadequacy and gaining her some power. Leonora Whiteside was another remarkable woman who broke the model of 'True Womanhood' by displaying tremendous self-direction following her husband's death. Leonora had married James Anderson Whitehead, an influential and extremely successful businessman, originally from Danville, Kentucky. They settled together at Ross's Landing (Chattanooga) and had nine children. James died in November 1861 and Leonora inherited a vast estate. Under her competent management, the estate accumulated substantially, reputedly making her "the richest woman in Tennessee."²⁹ The evidence from these sources suggests that material resources or class and wealth, were the key to overcoming the limitations of

²⁸ Paulina Read Le Grand to William Huntington, Edge Hill, 25 March 1838, William Huntington Papers, Virginia Historical Society (hereafter cited VHS).

²⁹ Robert Manson Myers, *The Children of Pride*, 1728-9.

nineteenth-century gender conventions. Therefore, slaveholding women were in a particularly advantageous position in order to overcome adversity and to demonstrate independence.

Ada Bacot, Keziah Brevard and Rachel O'Connor were well-known planters who wielded enormous coercive power over their slaves and over poorer whites. Bacot's importance as a client for tobacco and cotton placed her in a strong and enviable position. She was a huge source of potential employment in the area, and she could afford an overseer, which lessened the strain of the day-to-day management of her huge plantation. These factors combined to place her at the top of the social, class and racial hierarchy.³⁰ The fact that Ada Bacot was a widow did not lessen her power and influence as an important planter in South Carolina even in the antebellum era.

The widow Keziah Brevard from Richland District, South Carolina also managed to meld business acumen, managerial prowess and financial ability in a strong display of personal agency. A widow from 1844, Brevard managed three plantations, a gristmill, and two hundred slaves. By the time of her death in 1886, she had also more than doubled her holdings, which reflected her ability and business acumen.³¹ Rachel O'Connor was a widow who lived in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana. Her husband died in 1815, and for the next thirty-one years, Rachel successfully managed the family plantation, producing in excess of 150 bales of cotton per year, in addition to corn, potatoes and other essentials. As a single woman she faced many obstacles such as obtaining vital credit and having to deal with the jealousy from male slaveholders who lived in close proximity to her. Yet for these slaveholding women, their lives as widows were to be characterised more by their extraordinary success in managing and growing their business and plantations, than any constraints because of their single status.

³⁰ Ibid., 9.

³¹ John Hammond Moore (ed.) *A Plantation Mistress on the Eve of the Civil War: The Diary of Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard 1860-1861* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 1-17.

These women were, of course, a privileged, minority group in southern society and their experiences must be interpreted as such. However, they also demonstrate that changes in women's roles were already existent in the antebellum period. These changes often emerged from an ideologically conservative backdrop, which echoes the work of Suzanne Lebsock in her study of women in Petersburg, Virginia.³² Lebsock described the way in which Petersburg women "experienced increasing autonomy, autonomy in the sense of freedom from the utter dependence on particular men," despite the entrenched conservatism of the area. She also highlights that in the period before the war, "fewer [white] women were married, more women found work for wages, and more married women acquired separate estates, that is, property that their husbands could not touch."³³ These observations mirror some of the finding in this study that expose how some slaveholding widows exercised considerable autonomy in managing family plantations following the death of their husbands.

Keziah Brevard's diary chronicled her experiences as a plantation mistress in the years preceding the Civil War in 1860 and 1861. She revealed the tumultuous journey that accompanied her position as a female slave owner in the South, and in doing so revealed the way that she operated within a the framework of race, class and gender prescriptions that shifted before, during and after the war. Hers is an honest account, in which she complained frequently about her slaves, much like Laura Comer had done. "Oh our negroes, how much we have to bear with from them – have some I scarce ever get a civil word from no matter how kind and indulgent [I am] to them," she wrote on January 30th 1861.³⁴ There were days when frustration and fatigue clouded her perception of the slaves and their relationship to her, which led to angry outbursts such as on February 20th 1861.

³² Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (London: W.W. Norton & Company: 1985), xv.

³³ Ibid. Lebsock's study examined black and white women in an urban centre, but shades of her argument can also be seen within the planter class in the pre-war South.

³⁴ Ibid., 83.

Brevard also had several arguments with her driver Jim, who showed his “impudence” by testing her authority, and trying to expose her potential vulnerability, as a female slaveholder.³⁵

Historian George Rable highlights how slaveholding mistresses frequently used the words impudence and independence in reference to the behaviour of black slaves. They were words, which vocalised their frustration and ineptitude in understanding that slaves also had goals and aspirations of their own and that they were not *just* property.³⁶ Rable suggests that fixations, such as Brevard’s on impudence, was a reflection of their own realisation that power was slipping from their hands, particularly towards the end of the war when defeat appeared imminent.³⁷ For slave owners like Brevard the ‘impudence’ of their slaves was a clear sign that the slaves also sensed that freedom was looming. Just as white, slaveholding women had gained sufficient mastery to manage their plantations they saw that it was being taken from them and with it.

The end of the slave system also threatened the elevated status of slaveholding women as their livelihoods and whole way of life lay open to attack. In this context, Brevard’s reaction to her ‘impudent’ slave seems fairly typical of white, slaveholding women. However, she also manipulates her position as a woman by adding that “it is hard for a poor, lonely female to take impudence – I have taken gross impudence hundreds of times and let it pass unpunished.”³⁸ She clearly references her femininity as an excuse for her slaves’ disobedience. Kirsten Wood discusses the differences between male and female slaveholders. She highlights slaveholding widows’ use of ‘ladyhood’ and ‘female mastery’ to help them achieve productivity on the plantation, which displayed a conscious effort to

³⁵ Keziah Brevard makes reference to ‘Jim’ on a regular basis. On 7 Februray 1861 “Jim is an impudent Negro – and every servant knuckles to him;” 9 Februray 1861, “Jim is a self willed Negro”; 13 Februray 1861, “I never did have such impudence offered me – I do not think I ought to let it pass without punishment.” Ibid., 89.

³⁶ George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 117.

³⁷ Ibid., 117.

³⁸ Ibid.

use their gender to gain authority. Wood argues that widows relied on their feminine guile in conducting business affairs, successfully melding it to their advantage in their new role as slaveholding mistresses on plantations, which again highlights how they had achieved an increase in personal autonomy prior to the war in a behaviour that was subversive.³⁹

Keziah Brevard's relationship to her slaves was complicated. On occasion, they vexed her to such a degree that she wished they would "go back to Africa," (colonisation was one policy that was put forward by the Abolitionists in the North) but she also happy to spend long hours toiling with them and not just beside them.⁴⁰ Keziah's complex emotions regarding slavery correlate with the debate in Robert Shalhope's *Race, Class and Slavery*. Shalhope points out that whilst there was a growing consensus in the historiographical debate about the southern mentality on slavery, two major interpretations remain.

Historians such as Eugene Genovese posit that southerners, during the antebellum period and leading up to the Civil War, were proud of the institution of slavery and of their unique, southern civilisation built upon it. James McPherson and others highlight the 'Cash Sellers Thesis' which is that southerners were actually guilt ridden about slavery but, so heavily reliant on it as an institution, that they had to defend it as a way of life for fear of economic devastation. In Brevard's testimony we see a personal tussle between both of these interpretations. Brevard is proud of her slaves and displays a benevolent, paternalistic attitude towards them (for example in working with them and in caring for them). However, she talks of wanting them to 'Go back to Africa' hoping to somehow manage without them, but aware that her independence was secured by their servitude.

For the widow Brevard the Sand Hill slaves, Sylvia, Rosanna, Mary, Ned, Tom and Dorcas were her main source of company. In her diary she wrote that she baked with

³⁹ Wood, *Masterful Women*, 92.

⁴⁰ Robert Shalhope, 'Race, Class, Slavery and the Antebellum Southern Mind,' *Journal of Southern History*, 37:4 (1971): 557-574.

them, prepared cakes and so on.⁴¹ Though she was not deprived of white visitors, the ‘Negro servants’, as she refers to them, provided her daily interaction, which explains the numerous references to them throughout her diary. This complex relationship between female master and slave was not unique to Brevard, and was often seen in the relationships between single slaveholding women and their slaves. It also provides a sharp contrast to other moments when intense frustration set in, and they referred to them as “indolent” servants. Bacot and Brevard both made it clear that they wanted to be obeyed – and respected – not unlike a male master would be, but they had a distinctly more feminine manner of achieving their aim that tie to the idea of a distinct women’s culture. In doing so they exhibited personalism, personal agency and self-control.

There are many more cases of slaveholding widows who managed plantations and slaves, who also turned a profit. One lady who requires attention is Sarah Witherspoon McIver from Hartsville, Darlington County in South Carolina. Sarah was a widow who ably managed her plantation whilst raising a family. Widowed at the age of thirty-five McIver did not succumb to self-pity but rose to the challenges set before her. Sarah had been widowed in 1861; she was also an orphan who had lost eight of her siblings, which left her without an extended family to rely upon for help.⁴² Described by her grandson, Robert Coker, as a “remarkable woman,” McIver’s story bears testament to this description of her. She was a religious woman, originally a Presbyterian, who later integrated into the Baptist community.

Her story begins in 1854, and she wrote in her diary, at the time as a married woman living at home with her husband and family. The tone of the journal quickly alters with the tragic news that her husband has died and she records how she is left “in this

⁴¹ Ibid., 15 & 37.

⁴² A Short History of Sarah Witherspoon McIver and Genealogical Record, Coker Family Papers, SHC.

world without an earthly protector.”⁴³ McIver did not dwell on the tragedy but quickly proved that she was capable of upholding her status as a “true southern woman” and also managing successfully as a woman alone, with a young family to care for, even though she was without “an earthly protector.”⁴⁴ The change in her personal circumstances meant that she operated as a free and independent woman in the eyes of the law, which gave her considerable flexibility in managing her large estate. Caroline Foy Foscue also became the head of her household and the mistress of Trent Bridge Plantation (later Pollocksville) in Jones County, North Carolina when her husband died; at the time she was just twenty-nine-years old. Caroline also managed the plantation and raised her three children Henry, Mariana, and Christiana proving again that widows could achieve both success and respectability in their new status as single women.

Single women in the antebellum period quickly realised they were able to rely on their own initiative. A little further south, Catherine Smith Stone took over the management of her deceased husband’s plantation in South Carolina, after he died in 1844. Catherine, at the time, was forty-nine-years old and had five daughters: Martha, Regina, Jane, Susan and Catharine, aged between twelve and twenty years old, to support. She quickly learnt to act independently and to trust her own judgements, with little help from others as her husband’s family proved to be of no use and relied more on her, than providing any additional support in a reversal of gender roles. Catherine was self-assertive and decisive in ensuring her economic survival – she was a housekeeper to earn extra money, and moved in with her eldest daughter in the late 1850s, again for financial support. Her relatives, Ambrose and Matilda Stone in Alabama, even turned to *her* for money, imploring her in their letters to help provide for them and promising to return it when they could.

⁴³ Ibid., Sarah Witherspoon McIver Diary, 18 October 1861.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

This again revealed how single women were able to manage their own resources but also aid others in their hours of need, which challenged traditional notions of female vulnerability and dependence in the antebellum period.⁴⁵ It is illuminating to consider that in the mid-1850s when ideals of southern white womanhood were supposedly at their apex, the reality of some single women's lives reveal that the traditional conventions of womanhood began to be subtly worn away. Widowhood remained a difficult and testing time, but these case studies make known how some slaveholding women were able to overcome the financial, social and cultural constraints, which they laboured under in their daily lives.

Single women could also turn to others for advice on how best to manage a plantation, if the support and help was available, seeking advice on crop selection, harvesting, slave management, and finances. When Ruth Hairston's first husband Peter Wilson passed away in 1813 she was left to manage Berry Hill, a sizeable plantation in Virginia. Ruth turned to her father for advice and support on how best to manage the plantation. "I want you to rite [sic] me what I must do for I want to go altogether by your directions in everything," she wrote and imploring him, "Dear papa rite me every opportunity you have so that I may no [sic] how to manage for the best."⁴⁶

Evidently Ruth learnt fast and when her father passed away in 1832, he entrusted the bulk of his lands to her. In 1837 Ruth married for a second time to Robert Hairston, a tobacco planter from Henry County Virginia.⁴⁷ Sadly, the union for Ruth was an unhappy one, and she was left alone for months, whilst Robert 'attended' to his plantations in Mississippi as well as to his slave mistress. When he died in 1852, a controversy broke out when he left his property to a slave girl. Meanwhile, Ruth was

⁴⁵ Ambrose Stone to Catherine Stone, 6 March 1847. The Stone Family Papers, SHC.

⁴⁶ Ruth Stovall Hairston Wilson to her father, Peter Hairston, Berry Hill, 29 May 1814, Wilson and Hairston Family Papers, SHC.

⁴⁷ He also grew cotton in Columbus, Mississippi.

left with nothing.⁴⁸ This highlighted the vulnerability of some widows, as well as their dependence on the exact terms of their husbands' will, which was a situation that steadily improved with the advent of the Married Women's Property Acts by mid-century.

By the time of the Civil War and well into the post-war period, women's working roles further expanded as single women increasingly went out to work for wages. They were initially motivated by a conservative ethos to help contribute to their families who were affected by the material devastation brought by war. In planter class households the expansion of women's work was regularly discussed as young ladies talked of doing more manual work or being involved in household labour that their slaves had previously done. Virginia Hammett, a young eighteen-year-old girl who lived in Stafford County, Virginia, spoke in her diary about how her life had changed in the war. She claimed "*Necessity is the mother of ingenuity,*" as she found herself undertaking a wide range of work in the household such as sewing, organising the house, sweeping, making shoes and slippers, in addition to nursing the wounded soldiers and teaching in the post-war years.⁴⁹

The Civil War had acted as a catalyst that accelerated the changes in women's working roles and began to offer them wider access to paid work. As Mary Elizabeth Massey argues, "the Civil War compelled women to become more active, self-reliant, and resourceful, and this ultimately contributed to their economic, social, and intellectual advancement."⁵⁰ Consider the case of Frances Devereux Polk whose husband died at the end of the war. She refused to be dependent on her son's good will, in spite of her single status as a widow. In a letter to her daughter she wrote, "I do not think it right to be dependent upon my sons while I can do something and therefore my dear child I have

⁴⁸ Inventory of Wilson and Hairston Family Papers, SHC.1

⁴⁹ Virginia Hammett Diary, 1 August 1863, VHS.

⁵⁰ Mary Elizabeth Massey, *Women in the Civil War* (1966; reprint, University of Nebraska Press: 1994), xviii.

resolved to open a school in New Orleans.”⁵¹ Frances Polk shows considerable spirit in her endeavour to open a school and to remain independent in her widowhood. Although she never made it to New Orleans, she supported herself by teaching at the Columbia Female Institute and in doing so she highlighted how the war had escalated the range of opportunities open to single women. In the post-war period, Octavia Wyche Otey, the widow of William Madison Otey, a cotton planter of Meridianville, Alabama and Yazoo County in Mississippi also demonstrated how she was determined to manage alone, even though her newfound responsibilities were hard to bear. In Octavia’s diary, she discussed the personal burden of running “Green Lawn Plantation,” especially as a woman bringing up six children (all under the age of fifteen) and trying to negotiate and work with freed slaves in the post-war era of the New South.

Otey emits a sense of vulnerability, of standing alone in the world without a male protector. In March 1871 she confessed, “We had no one to take charge of us, to feel that we could call upon, so I asked my heavenly Father to take care of us.”⁵² Otey equates her personal insecurity with the absence of a male patriarch, in this case her husband, which she must have sorely felt in dealing with freed slaves who perhaps challenged her female authority. Octavia felt exposed in widowhood, beset with anxiety regarding her daily responsibilities and mounting financial problems that cast her in a different light to Ada Bacot, Keziah Brevard and Sarah McIver. For Otey, the post-war period resulted in a change in wealth and financial security and her anxieties reveal this: “I feel like I will go crazy if I can’t get the money to pay for my debts,” she admitted, and adds, “It frightens me how much I owe; I wonder if I can live through them.”⁵³ The reality of the post-war

⁵¹ Frances Devereux Polk to her daughter, Frances Polk Skipworth, 6 June 1866, The Polk Family Papers, SHC.

⁵² Octavia Wyche Otey Journal 1849-1888, Wyche and Otey Family Papers, 1824-1936, SHC.

⁵³ Octavia Wyche Otey Journal, 24 January 1871, 26 January 1871, 16 February 1871, SHC.

changes in women's working roles was at times a burden and a responsibility that caused some women considerable anxiety, particularly if they were not cushioned by wealth.⁵⁴

Widows like Otey persevered and survived, and made it through harrowing financial times. Otey continued to live and operate Green Lawn Plantation till her death in 1891. Extensive information appears about her children, her financial and legal affairs, and on the day-to-day running of the plantation. She records many of the daily anxieties that she felt as a plantation widow residing in Alabama in the post-war years.⁵⁵ She was not alone; other slaveholding widows struggled in the post-war era. They found that their independence from men was a double-edged sword as it forced them to become more autonomous but often labouring under difficult personal circumstances. They also suffered from a shift in status caused by military defeat and the loss of their workforce, which had resulted in the emancipation of more than four million slaves.⁵⁶ As Christine Carter argues, "these women had ventured boldly into new roles" by building on their experiences of work in the antebellum South, but this did not mean that their new tasks were always easy.⁵⁷

Many plantation mistresses struggled to understand how their good and faithful slaves could show defiance in the post-war years and this challenged their own newfound authority as female slaveholders. For example, the case of the widow Anne Jennings Wise Hobson, from Accomac County in Virginia shows how white, planter women felt frustrated when their slaves wanted to leave the plantation. Jennings admits she had tried everything to keep them "and tried to do my duty by them," but she writes, "we had

⁵⁴ A recent study of upper-class southern women's lives in the post-war era is Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003).

⁵⁵ Octavia Wyche Otey Journal 1849-1888, Wyche and Otey Family Papers, 1824-1936, SHC. For example 25 January 1871, 20 March 1871, 16 February 1871.

⁵⁶ Christine Jacobsen Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness: Unmarried Women in the Urban South 1800-1865* (University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 2006), 183.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.

nothing to do with setting them free, and are now relieved of any responsibility for their support henceforth. We will do what we can for those who do prove faithful.”⁵⁸

In the period between 1868 and 1869, Octavia seemed depressed and unhappy, weighed down by her additional responsibilities as a plantation mistress, and problems with the freed people and the mounting financial pressures. “It makes me so sad to see the month pass so rapidly by, my debts not paid, land not rented out, a heap of bad things, but yet everything might be worse” she fretted in January 1871.⁵⁹ Octavia’s anxieties clearly resonate with Catherine Edwards’s comments concerning the dilemma of widowhood that widows were Queens if they had property, servants and crops, but would struggle if they did not. Octavia *had* property but this did not mean that she was wealthy, and she found that she struggled on a daily basis because her wealth was tied up in her assets, rather than being cash rich.

For her, any benefits of personal agency derived from running a plantation were negated by the toil and responsibility of such a momentous task, which she found exhausting. This was compounded by her perceived lack of training, expertise or knowledge to do so. In the post-war years, her problems must have escalated, as additional challenges arose alongside emancipation, with slaves literally walking free from the plantations.⁶⁰ The planter women managing them were faced with the pertinent issue of who to employ to carry out the work, which often resulted in them taking on an increased share of the household tasks themselves, which challenged and revised old notions of southern womanhood.

⁵⁸ Anne Jennings Wise Hobson Diary, 9 April 1865, VHS. Jennings speaks volumes for many other white plantation mistresses (such as Brevard) who when faced with the reality that the slaves were deserting, said that they were a burden to her anyway and that it was a ‘relief’ that they had gone.

⁵⁹ Anne Hobson Diary, January 1871, VHS.

⁶⁰ For a discussion on emancipation in the South see: P. Daniel, “The Metamorphosis of Slavery 1865-1900,” *Journal of American History*, 66 (1979-80): 88-99; Eric Foner, “From Slavery to Freedom: The Birth of the Modern Black Community,” in Stephen Oates, *Portrait of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 416-430; Paul D. Escott ed., *Major Problems in the Old South*, Vol.1 (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1990), 537-557 & Susan Eva O’Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge, Mass.: UP, 2007).

Anne Jennings Wise Hobson was the widow of Frederick Plumer Hobson who died in April 1868. Even in the period before her husband's death, towards the end of the Civil War, she spoke of the way in which her work was slowly expanding on her Virginia plantation. She had to train a new cook, care for sick slaves, and educate her children and the Negroes.⁶¹ In her diary she refers to the trouble she had with some of her slaves, and her desire to work alone.⁶² Clearly a religious woman, Anne showed mixed emotions on the subject of slavery.

In the post-war period she talks of an "exodus" of former slaves leaving the surrounding area, all lured by the promise of freedom further north after the South's bitter defeat in the war.⁶³ "I have long thought it best for the white race to be free from the incubus of slavery," she notes on April 30th 1865. In reality she also felt disappointed that many of her slave family chose to leave the plantation. As she notes, only Anne, Eliza, Fannie and her children, remained on the Hobson plantation at Eastwood in Goochland County, Virginia.⁶⁴ She glossed over her obvious disappointment and claimed: "If we stay here we will hire labour, I have no fear of getting on and I feel a kind of relief to be so easily freed of the responsibility of caring for them [the slaves] in these times." However, Anne quickly qualifies this by commenting:

I am less convinced than ever that it is best for them to be free, and I feel great pity for the race but God knows that I have always felt that whenever He willed that we should give up I should not regret to part with them. With right management, I believe that in the end we will be better off. I trust country, family, life, honour, all the past, present, future to God.⁶⁵

Historian James McPherson, points to the 'guiltomania' of some southerners – the idea that they were economically reliant on slavery but nevertheless felt guilty about

⁶¹ Ibid., 24 October 1863, 27 December 1863, 24 January 1864, 12 November 1864.

⁶² Anne Hobson Journal, 24 October 1864, VHS.

⁶³ Ibid., 30 April 1865.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

their involvement in the institution of slavery.⁶⁶ Ultimately, white southern slaveholders, such as Hobson, Brevard, Bacot and Witherspoon understood that their elite position within the southern hierarchy was bound to the institution of slavery, but they may still have harboured some guilt in the part they played in helping to replicate racial hierarchies. As Hobson discovered, she was far more reliant on her hired help than she would ever like to admit.

In the post-war years, when her husband's health declined, she suddenly felt the mounting pressure of her growing responsibilities. "I shall have my hands more than full with no assistance with housekeeping, teaching and sewing, and last but by no means least the baby," she mused in 1868.⁶⁷ "My husband is very, very delicate. To our human eye he is certainly declining, wasting day by day," she confided in her diary, adding, "my whole life is a pleading appeal for my Husband's life!"⁶⁸ His death on May 30th 1868 left Anne as a "lone widow with a bleeding desolate heart," which was further intensified by her daughter's death five months later, after being administered a lethal dose of tartar emetio. This resulted in extended melancholic episodes that made it even harder for her to manage the daily responsibilities of plantation life. Yet again, Anne's case demonstrates that post-war independence was not always easy, but that more often than not, slaveholding women managed even in the most adverse circumstances.

Melancholy was a mindset that hindered some slaveholding women in their daily lives; others overcame it. The tumultuous journey of Ada Bacot is an example of how mental fortitude was a powerful weapon in overturning adversity. Bacot was a bereaved and childless widow living on a large plantation surrounded by black slaves

⁶⁶ Robert Shalhope, 'Race, Class, Slavery and the Antebellum Southern Mind,' *Journal of Southern History*, 37:4 (1971): 557-574.

⁶⁷ Anne Hobson Journal, 9 February 1868.

⁶⁸ Ibid. Anne Hobson was a Presbyterian, a woman guided by her faith. However, she worried that her husband lacked the same belief and in her comment on his life, she is also referring to his spiritual salvation.

at the tender age of twenty-seven.⁶⁹ The futility of her changed role weighed heavily on Bacot's shoulders at first. "I live merely to exist. I never feel lonely but I take no interest in anything, everything I do is mechanical. Nothing gives me pleasure, I go about like one who one has but a stated time to live," she wrote in those early months.⁷⁰ At the time Bacot was still young, and yet she had already suffered from a run of tragic personal events. Bacot was a religious woman, who loved her home state of South Carolina, missed her children, and felt alienated by her sister-in-law who detested her. Eventually forced to live alone on her dead husband's plantation, daily life became dominated by her concerns about family life and the tensions involved in slave management.

Yet, Bacot made a choice to reverse the tragedies of her early life, and made the decision to pursue war work in Virginia, perhaps as a way of escaping the troubles of her past. This kind of self-directed action fulfils the requirements of personal agency as the "capacity of individuals to shape the world in which they live."⁷¹ No longer referring to her constant weariness, headaches and personal misery, Bacot's diary entries are suddenly filled with joyful enthusiasm at the prospect of starting a new life in Virginia. In October 1861 she writes, "How shall I describe the events of this delightful day. I am at last almost sure of my trip to Virginia ... I can't describe my feelings I am so thankful to go, God has heard my prayer."⁷²

Bacot was a woman of enormous faith; during her time in Charlottesville, she attended church regularly, and the same religious ethos was translated into her work.

Her religious calling merged with her patriotism, gave her the strength to change her

⁶⁹ Jean V. Berlin, ed. *A Confederate Nurse: The Diary of Ada W. Bacot 1860-1863* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1994), 27-28.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Historian Walter Johnson warned that the meaning of 'agency' has become overloaded as a term. He points to a "misleading entanglement of the categories of 'humanity' and 'agency.'" Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* (Fall 2003): 113-124.

⁷² Ibid., 52.

life and overcome the most harrowing of personal circumstances, comforted by the knowledge that “thy will be done.” In this regard, Bacot worked within the limitations of gender models, and looked to God to sanctify the work she did, which inadvertently led to a blossoming of personal autonomy. It is with this renewed sense of purpose that Ada Bacot moved forward from the unhappy experiences at Arnmore to embrace a new life in Virginia, which significantly altered the course of her personal and professional life.⁷³

Nursing

Ada Bacot was not alone in her pursuit of war work as a nurse. Approximately 3,200 women were formally employed as nurses in the Civil War.⁷⁴ Whilst nurturing and caring roles were perfectly compatible with traditional ideals of southern womanhood, the expansion of these roles into a more public arena courted some controversy. “Refined, modest ladies, said the critics, had no business caring for strange men and certainly not rough, crude soldiers from all walks of life.”⁷⁵ Additionally, Ada Bacot’s class position as a slaveholding female meant that she was more likely to encounter some opposition regarding the propriety of war work as a nurse, as some southerners perceived it as a challenge to traditional gender models by expanding nurturing roles outside of the home.

Yet, women who nursed, or who wanted to nurse, got around this obstacle by emphasising the temporary nature of their work in wartime. This correlates to Phoebe Yates Pember’s bold statement in support of female nurses during the war, stating that they must “soar beyond conventional modesty” because of the exigencies of wartime

⁷³ Ada Bacot’s earlier memories at Arnmore were happy. She recalls fonder memories when she was a mistress and “a loving husband provided. Memory carries me back to the happy time, and fills my eyes with tears.” 1 May 1861, 32. Berlin, *A Confederate Nurse*.

⁷⁴ Rable, *Civil Wars*, 121.

⁷⁵ Massey, *Women in the Civil War*, 44.

conditions. Pember suggested that the exceptional circumstances born of wartime were a viable reason why southern women should be allowed to step outside of their allotted sphere of home and family. She stressed that the feminine virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity held in such high regard by southerners, could be put to good use in wartime by allowing women to nurse. Pember argued that the unique conditions of war permitted a temporary re-modelling of southern womanhood – in order to support the Confederacy and the men who were fighting, and dying for its survival.⁷⁶ This dovetailed with a stress on voluntarism in the South, which was a way of expressing the ‘temporary’ nature of women’s new or expanded wartime roles.⁷⁷ However, as Clinton argues, “temporary changes often had permanent impact” which is reflected in women’s working roles in the post-war period.⁷⁸

It is important to emphasise the basis on which southern women expanded their working roles in wartime. As Pember argued eloquently, women’s traditional roles in the household and family could be used as an effective springboard to help in the war effort. They had a natural capacity for relieving the suffering of others, and this placed single women, particularly widows and spinsters without children, in an ideal position to transfer their skills from the private to the public arena.⁷⁹ She claimed it was a natural step for women to use their sweet emphatic natures in caring for soldiers, and argued that it was evidence of women fulfilling the calling for single blessedness by being useful to their family and to their wider community. Pember therefore spoke out in defence of women’s virtue, and argued that it was necessary for women to “become hard and gross”

⁷⁶ For a further discussion on the re-construction of gender models see Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood*, 10-50.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 121. Rable notes that whilst women gained self-confidence, meaning and importance through nursing, they knew it was only a temporary role. He claims that most went back to being wives and mothers after the war, but he does not account for those women who were single.

⁷⁸ Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War: American Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1984), 121. Also see 121-146.

⁷⁹ Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate Nation 1861-1865* (New York & Cambridge: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 225-229.

in their capacity to function as competent nurses in the Civil War. She argued that in order to ensure absolute efficiency, women must be prepared to extend their care giving roles from inside, to outside of the family. She argued that far from sullyng a woman's good nature, it purified her. In her account of life in Richmond, Pember wrote on the subject of nursing,

If the ordeal does not chasten and purify her nature, if the contemplation of suffering and endurance does not make her wiser and better, and if the daily fire through which she passes does not draw from her nature the sweet fragrance of benevolence, charity and love, – then indeed a hospital has been no fit place for her.⁸⁰

By demonstrating her remarkable resilience, hard working attitude and level headed work ethic, women like Pember eventually drew admiration from southern society by fulfilling their calling for single blessedness.⁸¹ Far from being whimsical or a burden to their families and wider community, single women frequently proved that they fulfilled the requirements of single blessedness and demonstrated that they were being 'useful' and doing 'good' for others in the most adverse conditions.

Likewise, Kate Cumming from Mobile, Alabama was an unmarried woman of about thirty when the war broke out. She admitted that, "There is a good deal of trouble about the ladies in some of the hospitals of this department. Our friends have advised us to go home, as they say it is not considered respectable to go into one." Yet Kate overcame this initial stigma, determined to do her bit for the cause. Upon reflection she admits, "I confess I wavered about the propriety of it [nursing] but when I remembered the suffering I had witnessed, and the relief I had given, my mind was made up to go into one [of the hospitals] if allowed to do so."⁸² She referred to a higher calling, to a religious protector [God] who she claimed cast ultimate approval over her actions. Kate

⁸⁰ Pember, *A Southern Woman's Story*, 105.

⁸¹ Jennifer Lynn Gross, "Lonely Lives are not Necessarily Joyless," 46-49.

⁸² Kate Cumming, *A Journal of Hospital Life in the Confederate Army of Tennessee: from the Battle of Shiloh to the End of the War* (Louisville: John P. Morgan & Co.; New Orleans: W. Evelyn, c. 1866), 44.

drew strength from her belief that she was doing the will of God, and wrote in her journal on September 7th 1862, “Christians should not mind what the world says [as they are] striving to do their duty to their God,” in much the same way as Bacot felt comforted by her relationship with God.⁸³

These women were not alone in encouraging other southern women to nurse, but they were particularly outspoken in voicing their opinions. As Cumming observed, “Soldiers fight for the battles of our country, and the least we can do is to cherish them in their helplessness, and bind up their wounds, all *true* women will do it, who love their country.”⁸⁴ Effectively, she argued that southern women, who were reluctant in coming forward to nurse, were shirking their duties as women. Providing a “ministering spirit at the couch of the sick,” she claimed was women’s special province. It was an extension of the Cult of True Womanhood, which stated that it was acceptable to care for men within the domestic sphere of home and family.

Indeed, Barbara Welter retrospectively observed in 1966 that “nursing the sick, particularly sick males, not only made a woman feel useful and accomplished, but increased her influence” within the family.⁸⁵ Women therefore had to prove that their roles within the family and domestic setting could be stretched out and expanded to help care for sick soldiers in wartime. Kate Cumming highlighted the importance of women fulfilling this much-needed new role and argued that it was simply a broadening out of their traditional gender roles. As a result, the Civil War helped to significantly alter old perceptions of unmarried women and accelerated the pace of social change in single women’s lives by extending their sphere.

Hospital work was arduous and exhausting, especially for the southern matrons. In her first post at Tishomingo Hospital, a former hotel in Corinth, Mississippi, Cumming

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

joined a party of over forty women who had ventured into Corinth after the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862.⁸⁶ Together they formed part of a small, but growing minority of women committed to nursing as a means of showing their dedicated support to the cause. Cumming reported the “sad scenes” upon her arrival on April 11th 1862, the “men and boys mutilated in every imaginable way,” their bodies littering the hall, gallery and small rooms.⁸⁷ The single women who joined her showed tremendous bravery by stepping outside of their protected domain of home and family into a place where the odour of death seeped into every crevice of the hospital wards. “The foul air from the mass of human beings at first made me giddy and sick, but I soon got over it,” she confessed. Kate’s matter of fact portrayal of the horrors of the hospital wards undercut certain tenets of the Cult of True Womanhood that portrayed women as the weaker, inferior, more vulnerable, dependent and more delicate sex. Her stoicism and bravery was reflected throughout the pages of her diary and challenged traditional gender models that portrayed women as needy and frail. She subverts notions of passive femininity in her detailed descriptions of her work in the hospital wards. “We have to walk, and when we have to give the men anything, kneel, in blood and water; but we think nothing of it,” she writes.⁸⁸ “It is useless to say the surgeons will not allow us [to nurse]; we have our rights, and if asserted properly will get them. This is our right and ours alone.”⁸⁹

Cumming was not inhibited by her single status or by her class position that in theory barred her from certain types of work because of her “supposed” need for protection. A particularly illuminating example on April 24th 1862 was Cumming’s harrowing account of the amputation bay, which was cornered off at the end of the ward.

⁸⁶ In the battle of Shiloh it is reported that 23, 746 Confederate and Union soldiers were killed, wounded or went missing, “The Civil War Trust,” <http://www.civilwar.org/battlefields/shiloh.html?tab=facts>. Accessed 7/10/12.

⁸⁷ Kate Cumming, *A Journal of Hospital Life*, 44.

⁸⁸ Kate Cumming, *A Journal of Hospital Life*, 13.

⁸⁹ Kate Cumming, *A Journal of Hospital Life*, 44.

It was a place that she usually avoided, but at times was compelled to pass – “the sight I there beheld made me shudder and sick at heart. A stream of blood ran from the table into a tub into which the [soldier’s] arm [fell].”⁹⁰ It represented one of the many harrowing duties that female nurses performed in wartime. These included managing and supervising the hospital wards or hospital departments, sitting with soldiers, writing letters for them to send to their loved ones, attending to the deathbeds, cooking and sewing.⁹¹ At the beginning of the war women tended to be a few steps removed from “direct patient care” (as in the case of Ada Bacot when she initially worked as a housekeeper at Maupin House) because their class and social position acted as a barrier preventing them from more interactive care, supposedly to protect their delicacy and honour.⁹² Yet as the war intensified so too did the role of its female nurses.

Phoebe Yates Pember, a widow from South Carolina, presided as Matron of Chimborazo Hospital, in Richmond, in the 2nd division from 1862-1865.⁹³ Pember was born into a wealthy Jewish family in Charleston, South Carolina on August 18th, 1823. Her father was Jacob Clavius Levy, her mother, Fanny Yates, a native of England. Prior to the Civil War, Phoebe married Thomas Pember of Boston and in doing so fulfilled her duty as a wife and proper southern lady. Soon after their marriage, Thomas contracted tuberculosis, and in spite of a move south to aid his recovery, he died in Aiken, South Carolina, on July 9th 1861, leaving his wife a widow at the age of thirty-six. At first it must have been hard for Pember, unaccustomed to life as a widow on the eve of war. With her husband gone, and her role and status altered, Phoebe, like Ada Bacot had done,

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Faust, Glymph & Rable, eds., *A Woman’s War*, 5.

⁹² Ibid., 5.

⁹³ Phoebe Yates Pember, *A Southern Woman’s Story*, 19.

moved to Richmond, and offered her services as a nurse where she perceived the need to be greatest.⁹⁴

First she worked in Chimborazo, a large hospital located in the besieged capital of Richmond.⁹⁵ It had opened in 1862, and consisted of 150 wards, grouped into five divisions, and Pember was Chief Matron over the second division. At the time it was the largest military hospital in the world, and treated over 76,000 patients over the course of the war. When Pember first started working there she encountered “considerable opposition” as a woman entering into what was perceived to be a male profession. Bell Wiley noted the reaction of one of the ward surgeons who told his friend “*one of them had come,*” in reference to Phoebe *and* to her gender.⁹⁶ Pember, undeterred by such prejudice, quickly demonstrated that she had nerves of steel, and “ignored the opposition based on prejudice and pitched into the more tangible obstacles with zest and determination that accomplished wonders.”⁹⁷

Throughout her diary there are many examples of Pember going beyond the call of duty and of the requirements of her station. Like many Confederate nurses, Pember wrote letters on behalf of patients to their loved ones. She worked industriously to attend to patients needs. On one occasion, after the battle of Fredericksburg, she went to special lengths to help an eighteen-year-old soldier, who lay wounded and dying in a hospital bed, by finding his friend, who had marched alongside him during battle. Pember found his companion Perry, by making enquiries at other hospitals, and when they were reunited the boy died in his friend’s arms.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Richmond was the chief medical centre of the Confederacy and many of the most important general hospitals were established in the city. Other hospitals established in Richmond included Winder opened in 1862 and Jackson opened in 1863. See also, Louise Oates, ‘Civil War Nurses,’ *The American Journal of Nursing* 28: 3 (1928): 207-212.

⁹⁵ Phoebe Yates Pember, *A Southern Woman*, 1 & 4.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

Single, southern matrons faced a raft of different problems that had to be overcome on a daily basis – solutions therefore required considerable fortitude and personal agency. In Pember's case her workload was initially focused on ensuring there were adequate provisions for patients care and special diets and also that whiskey was dispensed correctly. Pember showed herself to be a "brisk and brilliant matron" who had "a will of steel" that enabled her to overcome many of the constraints of her gender.⁹⁹ As Wiley pointed out, her resolute nature kept her working at the hospital throughout the war years, and where others tried and failed she triumphed, proving that single, white women were far from the 'weaker sex' but strong and capable women showing agency and self-control in the most perilous circumstances.

The recruitment of women to work as assistants in hospitals was a difficult task. Hospital work was challenging – the hours were long, the pay low and the conditions grim. The hospitals themselves were a mix of paid physicians and nurses, working alongside a small army of volunteers. Women who nursed often did so for altruistic reasons, in the hope of making a difference to the war effort, or to help care for the men who had fallen in fighting to preserve their way of life. George Rable details the staff and pay structure in hospitals and how this was laid out in Congress in 1862. These included the following: two Chief Matrons per hospital earning \$40 per month to supervise the soldier's diets, two assistant matrons earning \$35 per month to supervise the laundry, two matrons in each ward earning \$30 per month to care for bedding, to feed soldiers and administer medicine, plus additional nurses and cooks earning \$25 per month.¹⁰⁰ The Chief Matrons earned the most, but still this was not much at \$45 per month. The matrons were mostly widows and spinsters (without the commitment of children).

⁹⁹ Ibid., 6. (Quotation from T. C. DeLeon).

¹⁰⁰ Rable, *Civil Wars*, 122.

Phoebe Pember was the Chief Matron at Chimborazo Hospital in Richmond, Virginia from 1862-1865. She wrote to her sister in November 1862, giving her details about working conditions in Confederate hospitals, “I am to have board and lodging in the Hospital and at a boarding house adjacent and forty dollars a month, which will clothe me. I have entire charge of my department, seeing that everything is cleanly, orderly and all prescriptions of physicians given in proper time, food properly prepared and so on.”¹⁰¹ These observations are inline with the information on pay and duties given by Congress.¹⁰² Pember wrote that her salary was so low that she had to write at night for magazines, or copyrighting for the department, in order to supplement her salary. She did not complain about her low wages and adds, “I am perfectly happy, have more than sufficient (means) for my small wants, and thrown upon myself for occupation attend more thoroughly to my duties than I possibly could in other circumstances.”¹⁰³ For her, and for many slaveholding or elite women in a similar position, the satisfaction that accompanied her station was the chief motivation to nurse, as opposed to fiscal gain. Yet, in the same way that plantation mistresses became more accustomed to the different tasks required of them in plantation management during the war, Confederate nurses also came to understand the demands of their wartime roles, which is illuminating considering their image as vulnerable and dependent characters.

Widows and spinsters typically took on the more senior roles within the hospital hierarchy. Consequently, over time they developed a heightened self-awareness and a sense of agency as they struggled to overcome daily problems associated with hospital management. As the war unexpectedly wore on, with little sign of an imminent end,

¹⁰¹ Pember, *A Southern Woman's Story*, 110-111.

¹⁰² In autumn 1862 Congress set out official nursing duties and salaries. These have been detailed on the previous page. Rable, *Civil Wars*, 122.

¹⁰³ Phoebe Yates Pember to her sister, Richmond, Virginia, 30 January 1863, in Pember, *A Southern Woman's Story*, 110-111.

women were increasingly relied upon to help, and in doing so they came to be valued. The war opened up opportunities for single, southern women to actively demonstrate their calling to embrace a life of single blessedness, and as wealthy slaveholding widows also gave their time and energy so freely they also became deserving of the title of single blessedness. The war therefore blurred the boundaries between married and single, in what has been referred to as a cultural re-assessment of singleness.¹⁰⁴

Pember talks about the testing time she had with some hospital assistants. In *A Disappointing Experiment* she discusses the recruitment of a hospital assistant, “My choice hesitated between ladies of education and position, who I knew would aid me (but be less keen on supervision and authority) to the common class of respectable servants, who were more amenable to authority.”¹⁰⁵ This injection of class again highlights the difference social standing made to the work allocation in hospitals, and the type of work that was deemed acceptable to different classes of southern women. Whilst some planter class women were prepared to get involved in a wide variety of tasks, others would complain about the propriety of certain jobs that they were given, because they still considered it unsuitable for their class or gender. For example, when Pember asked a North Carolinian woman to assist her in a task, she replied that she “was not going anywhere in a place where a man sat up on his bed in his shirt.”¹⁰⁶ Clearly then, not all women were as willing as others in their willingness to pursue war work.

Wealthy widows like Pember repeatedly proved how resourceful they were throughout the war. In April 1863, following a battle on Drewry’s Bluff, Pember showed considerable agency in her response to the problem of lack of provisions and staff, by making makeshift beds for soldiers by putting blankets on the floor. There, she

¹⁰⁴ Lee Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty A Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780–1840* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1984), 13–14.

¹⁰⁵ Phoebe Yates Pember, *A Southern Woman’s Story*, 32.

¹⁰⁶ Phoebe Yates Pember, *A Southern Woman’s Story*, 33.

toiled throughout the night “armed with lint, bandages, castile soap and a basin of warm water” moving from bed to bed, bathing fractured limbs” and tending to the sick.¹⁰⁷ She read comforting words from the Bible to the sick and dying, and wrote touching letters to family and sweethearts to inform them of the fate of their loved ones.

Clearly, the warmth of female sympathy was a valuable commodity in wartime, which both replicated traditional gender roles, whilst at the same time revising them. Female nurses worked tirelessly in the care of Confederate soldiers. Pember worked as a nurse for over four years, before finally “necessity compelled me to leave my hospital” in 1864. Even then, Pember admitted, “It had been like tearing body and soul apart...I had never been separated but one day in nearly four years.”¹⁰⁸ Pember’s story re-iterates how elite, white women fulfilled the calling of single blessedness in their care of soldiers during the war. Pember’s dedication was so great that she did not take a single day’s break in four years, despite the fact that it was taking a serious toll on her mental and physical health. She had literally sacrificed herself for the sake of the Confederacy and in doing so slowly gained recognition for her devotion to the cause.

Mrs. Ella Newsom, a childless widow from Memphis, was also from a wealthy, aristocratic background. Like Pember and Cumming, Newsom has become an icon for her “heroic and unselfish devotion to the cause,” and to her unswerving commitment to the nursing profession, which again tie in with the fulfilment of single blessedness.¹⁰⁹ Ella Newsom demonstrated that she was an altruistic woman driven by her service to others, rather than by her own needs. When her husband, Dr. Frank Newsom died, Ella was left a wealthy woman, but rather than wasting the money she used her inherited wealth to personally invest in buying medical provisions that would be of benefit to the Confederate

¹⁰⁷ Phoebe Yates Pember, *A Southern Woman’s Story*, 38-39.

¹⁰⁸ Phoebe Yates Pember, *A Southern Woman’s Story*, 78.

¹⁰⁹ J.Fraise Richard, *The Florence Nightingale of the Southern Army: Experiences of Mrs. Ella. K. Newsom, Confederate Nurse in the Great War of 1861-65* (New York & Baltimore: Broadway Publishing Company, 1914), 13.

soldiers during the Civil War. She distributed the supplies herself, judging first where the need was greatest, and in doing so she combined altruism and self-agency. She was given the “entire charge of a hospital” at Bowling Green, Kentucky as a reflection of her capability and by February 1862, she had moved to Nashville, where she re-organised Howard High School into a hospital for the sick and wounded. In each facility she visited, she quickly demonstrated her dedication, her “remarkable executive ability,” and blossoming independent spirit.¹¹⁰ Ella Newsom was later dubbed “the Florence Nightingale of the South,” as she visited so many hospitals during the Civil War period acting as a visiting angel who distributed supplies and helped to organise them so as to ensure efficiency – a responsible job for a Southern lady. She recognised the crucial role that southern women could play during the war, and also demonstrated that she had the personal capacity to make the best of her own circumstances.

In the *Daily Florida Citizen* in 1894, a similar tribute heralded the efforts of Mary Martha Reid, a widow from Florida who nursed in the Civil War. It described her as a “peerless character,” a woman who provided “splendid services” to the Confederate soldiers during the war.¹¹¹ In a letter from George T. Maxwell, he praised her “disposition, character and invaluable services during the war,” and depicted her as a “well-rounded and symmetrical character,” with many good soldiers placed in her debt for the hard work and personal sacrifices she made for them in the war.¹¹² As a widow, Mary Martha Reid was well placed to serve as a nurse, much as Pember and Bacot were. As a result of their outstanding efforts during wartime, these individuals were regarded as useful (a key requirement of single blessedness), ‘capable’ and also, womanly.

Class, age and marital status were key factors in determining the potential suitability of women who should nurse in wartime. Twenty-five year old Augusta Jane

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 39.

¹¹¹ *Daily Florida Citizen*, Friday 7 August 1894, Swann Family Papers, SHC.

¹¹² Ibid.

Evans, an unmarried novelist from Mobile, Alabama applied to work as a nurse in Marietta, Georgia, hoping to work alongside her friend, Mrs. Ella Newsom.¹¹³ Newsom – a widow and well-known Confederate war nurse was disappointed when Augusta was dissuaded from taking up the post she had applied for due to her family’s opposition to it.¹¹⁴ As Augusta explained in a letter to Ella on October 28th, 1863 her age and her status made it impossible for her join her.

I shall not be able to join you in Marietta as I expected when I applied to you for a position. The truth simply is, that my family is so opposed to my doing so, *especially my brothers*, [so much so] that I have been forced to give up the scheme. I was and am *still*, very anxious to go into hospitals and selected Marietta because you were there. But when the boys learned of my application, they opposed it so strenuously, and urged me so earnestly to abandon the idea, that I feel unwilling to take the step which they disapprove so vehemently...I feel that the work is a noble one, and I long to be at your side, working with you.¹¹⁵

Evans was a young, unmarried woman, which in part explains her brothers’ reluctance to let her go, compared to Ella who was a more mature, worldly-wise widow, who perhaps faced less opposition.

It is well documented that Augusta later helped nurse in the war, an experience so profound that it formed the inspiration of her wartime novel *Macaria* that did so much to improve the perception and visibility of single women in wartime. In Augusta Jane Evans’s famous wartime novel *Macaria*, the novel’s central character Irene, is a single woman who dedicates herself to a life of single blessedness. She talks about her calling to become a nurse in Richmond and in doing so reinforces that “the call is imperative. Mother’s and wives are, in most instances, kept at home; but I have nothing to bind me

¹¹³ J.Fraide Richard, *The Florence Nightingale of the Southern Army: Experiences of Mrs.Ella. K. Newsom, Confederate Nurse in the Great War of 1861-1865* (New York & Baltimore: Broadway Publishing Company, 1914), 95.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. Though it is important to note that Augusta later nursed sick soldiers and she based her wartime novel *Macaria* on these experiences, serving as a good example of how single women could fulfil the notion of single blessedness through their wartime work.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

here. I have no ties to prevent me from giving my services in the only way in which I can aid the cause for which my father died. I feel it a sacred duty.”¹¹⁶

She formulated characters that challenged the mores of archetypical domestic fiction and frequently placed single women at the heart of her narrative, re-affirming the centrality of the Cult of Single Blessedness. At times, she depicted married women as incomplete in their conjugal roles, which again helped to erode popular notions of what constituted the ideal woman.¹¹⁷ Through her writing she proved that she was a resourceful and autonomous individual herself, reflected by her willingness to approach certain taboos (such as female singleness) and in the stories that she published so successfully. In doing so, Evans stressed the importance of “Womanly Usefulness” for women who were single. Similar ideas have been put forward in Murray’s thesis on Louisa May Alcott. She suggests that Alcott, a domestic novelist from the North, who penned novels such as *Behind a Mask* and *Little Women*, was making an important statement about female singleness. Like Evans, Alcott develops a number of strong female characters, single women who lie at the heart of the novel. For example, Jo March in *Little Women* was a bright, ambitious individual who clearly understood that in order to be accepted in nineteenth-century America she must be seen to adhere to the ideals of “True Womanhood and to “the Cult of Domesticity.” Consequently, Jo performed or ‘mimicked’ the part of the ideal woman and in doing so gained social acceptance, thus avoiding the marginalisation associated with spinsterhood. Evans’s heroines did much the same, fusing social acceptability with a degree of autonomous behaviour. Evans mirrors the same

¹¹⁶ Jennifer Lynn Gross, “ ‘ Lonely Lives are not necessarily Joyless’: Augusta Jane Evan’s *Macaria* and the Creation of a Place for Single Womanhood in the Postwar South,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 2:1 (Spring 2001): 46.

¹¹⁷ Amanda M. Murray, “My Sisters, don’t be afraid of the words, ‘old maid’: Demarginalizing the Spinster in Louisa May Alcott” (master’s thesis, Villanova University, 2009), Introduction.

behaviour in her own life, by claiming that she started writing for altruistic reasons rather than a personal desire to win fame and fortune.¹¹⁸

Increasingly single, southern women shared in a drive to offer their time and services to the war effort, perhaps buoyed on by the change in perception towards female nurses. Emma Mordecai, a mature unmarried woman from a well-respected Jewish family in North Carolina propelled herself forward and offered her services as a nurse in 1864. Disturbed by the devastating picture given by her relative, Rose (who worked in a hospital) of the condition of “our brave men, now more prostrate and helpless than infants, and the urgent need there was of help at the hospital determined me to go in and lend my mite towards alleviating their sufferings,” she was determined to help. She recognised, “I am grateful to be strong enough to help nurse,” and in doing so highlighted the gap between the model of true womanhood (that saw women as delicate and weak) and the reality of the strong, and capable southern woman. She describes herself as physically fit, and able to nurse, and in doing so juxtaposes the weakness of the male soldiers alongside her female resilience.¹¹⁹

Her advanced age of fifty-two helped her gain entry into a profession that stigmatised young, single women, seeing them as a threat and disruptive element in the hospital. For Emma’s sister, Ellen Mordecai, an ageing single woman from North Carolina, the will to help was also clearly evident, though in her case, she felt constrained by her responsibilities at home. She confessed in a letter to her brother George Mordecai in September 1862, “If I had no home duties I should most willingly be detailed one [a nursing assignment] and go and do a woman’s part in ameliorating the sufferings of the wounded at Manassas.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ The Diary of Emma Mordecai, 18 May 1864, The Mordecai Family Papers, 1649-1947, SHC.

¹²⁰ Ellen Mordecai to George Mordecai, Richmond, 4 September 1862, The Mordecai Family Papers, SHC.

It is clear therefore, that unmarried women were willing to transfer their pre-war experiences as nurturers and carers in the domestic setting, to help in a more public role as nurses on the front line in wartime. Whilst not all women were prepared to expand their traditional gender roles outside of the home, many more were, and in doing so they revised and challenged old notions of femininity. As a result they temporarily revised and expanded their working roles due to the exigencies of wartime and gained respect and admiration for doing so. These changes, that some claimed were temporary often became more permanent in the post-war era, which helped revise and expand the boundaries of southern womanhood, which included a cultural re-assessment of female singleness. This led to greater autonomy for single women. In doing so, these women helped to challenge the idea that women compromised their delicacy and femininity by working outside the home. Thus, in the course of time, it led to a growing acceptance for the new role of women as nurses, and their role could be justified as an extension to the traditional role as caregivers within the home and family.

Teaching

Teaching was another vocation that had its roots firmly in the home and family, yet in the pre-war setting it had not developed into an established vocation for women in the public arena. Single women often spoke of the ways in which they helped care for brothers and sisters, nieces or nephews, or gave Bible readings to the slaves as part of their daily routine within the domestic setting. Plantation mistresses had cared for the physical, mental, and spiritual well being of their slaves long before the firing of the guns at Fort Sumter. Anne Hobson noted in her diary how she had taught two classes of slave children in the morning and met with the older bondspeople in the afternoon. Later in 1864, she described her usual morning routine, which included “reading the scriptures and prayers,” “attending to

household matters,” and “teaching some of the coloured children before breakfast and my own little ones.”¹²¹ Teaching the slaves involved reading from the Bible and prayers; religious instruction intended to civilise black slaves and converting them to Christianity. It was part of a woman’s traditional role on the plantation, and it was considered appropriate behaviour for upper-class women.

Before the war, few elite women taught in an official capacity, although they often worked tirelessly in helping to educate children and sometimes slaves in the private setting of home and family. As elite women came from wealthy families, they seldom had the financial motivation to work outside the home, and were usually discouraged from doing so by their families. In North Carolina it is estimated that only seven per cent of women were teachers in 1860, which rose to fifty percent by 1865.¹²² The war, therefore, seems to have again, acted as a catalyst in expanding women’s traditional roles as nurturers and educators in the home, and it made their roles more acceptable and widespread in the Civil War and post-war era. It highlighted trends that were already occurring in the antebellum years and accelerated the pace of social change in single women’s lives by expanding the rigid ideologies surrounding true womanhood.

Yet, even in the early 1800s a few cases do exist where single women were becoming well established in their role as teachers, though these were rare. Consider the example of Rachel Mordecai, a young unmarried woman from North Carolina. Rachel’s father owned a boarding school for girls and he was clearly driven by his desire to show that it operated by “the highest standards of pedagogical excellence and moral respectability.”¹²³ In a curious decision, he decided to use his daughter, Rachel, as a “walking advertisement” for what could be achieved in the education of refined young

¹²¹ Anne Hobson Diary, 24 January 1864, 12 November 1864, Hobson Papers, VHS.

¹²² Faust, Glymph & Rable, *A Woman’s War*, 9.

¹²³ Emily Bingham, *Mordecai: An Early American Family* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 37.

ladies.¹²⁴ In the context of the early 1800s this seems an unusual decision on his part, considering the early nineteenth-century view that “learned women risked being seen as asexual and unfeminine,” which placed his daughter outside of the framework of appropriate gender conventions and openly challenged them.

Rachel was made a partner in the school and she helped teach and share the administrative responsibilities. Jacob thought that she had the “ability to shape the female character and intellect in the girls who attended the school,” which reflects his more liberal philosophy on southern womanhood.¹²⁵ In reality, her father used her as a pawn, to re-energise his flagship school for girls, without consideration of the personal cost on Rachel’s future life as “genteel women did not, as a rule, take on paid work” and therefore, in complying with her father’s wishes, Rachel stepped outside of her designated sphere, and risked criticism from the outside world.¹²⁶ Rachel understood that by aiding her father, she was putting her reputation at risk but pursued the vocation nonetheless. Rachel’s case, whilst unusual, does demonstrate that even in the early 1800s some women were willing to teach, if only to conform to their family’s wishes. Fortunately for Rachel, her work also led to self-fulfilment and a sense of growing independence.

These isolated cases gradually started to become more prevalent in the late antebellum period. In 1859, Anna Clayton a young, single woman from North Carolina spoke with obvious pride about her work as a teacher. She described teaching as a “noble, high toned occupation,” and added “I feel quite free at this time,” in reference to her work and to her unmarried status.¹²⁷ Anne Elizabeth Holt also worked as a governess from the late 1850s to mid-1860s. Holt was less effusive about her role and often felt overwhelmed

¹²⁴ Bingham, *Mordecai*, 37.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Bingham, *Mordecai*, 38.

¹²⁷ Anna Clayton Papers, 19 May 1859, SHC. Likewise, in September 1835 Sarah Varick Cozen (who was also unmarried) took charge of a school. She noted, “Have again taken charge of a school, how great the responsibility of my situation.” September 15 1834, Sarah Varick Cozen’s Diary, SHC.

by “the responsibility” that accompanied it. However, on her twenty-fifth birthday she reasoned that if she never-married then her “care should be to gain by a good example and upright conduct a more worthy and honourable character” through the avenue of teaching which echoed the fundamental components of single blessedness.¹²⁸

Yet, in spite of her volition to teach, she regularly faltered, and at times displayed an uncertainty in her abilities as a teacher or as an adequate means of sustaining her independence. On May 18th 1859 she admits, “I know and feel my weakness and dependence and [realise] that my best resolves are worth nothing and my greatest efforts are worthless without the assistance of his Holy Spirit.”¹²⁹ Holt’s language of dependence – her looking up to God to ‘assist’ her, or worrying that she would fall-short in her endeavours as a teacher, does not detract from the fact that she was showing considerable autonomy by teaching in pre-war era. These women, in many ways were the role models for the Civil War and post-war era, because they represented *real* models that provided, *real* alternatives to the Cult of True Womanhood.

The vagaries of war significantly altered the economic landscape of the Confederacy and “propelled women into work outside of the home” in an effort to contribute to the domestic economy. The conservative ethos that pushed women into teaching in the Civil War and post-war era, led to a re-assessment, and broadening of, working roles outside of the home, and resulted in an increase in personal autonomy for women.¹³⁰ As the superintendent of the public instruction in Alabama revealed in 1833, “members of the most elegant and cultivated families in the State are engaged in teaching.”¹³¹ As more and more women went out to work in order to help contribute to the household economy they

¹²⁸ Anne Elizabeth Holt Diary, January 25 1861, VHS.

¹²⁹ Anne Holt Diary, May 18 1859, VHS.

¹³⁰ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 1970), 111-133.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

started “to rely less on the hierarchical relations of the slaveholding family and assert instead a sense of independence,” which dovetails with the evidence in this study.¹³²

The initial motivation that led single women into teaching was varied. A significant number of women were galvanised by economic necessity that intensified in the Civil War period and in its aftermath. A particularly harrowing story of a woman driven by economic need was the case of Mary Elliott Johnstone. Mary was the wife of rice planter, Andrew Johnstone, who owned property at Annandale, near Georgetown, South Carolina. He also owned a house in Beaumont at Flat Rock, North Carolina. The couple had six children, in addition to a son from Andrew Johnstone’s first marriage. In June 1864, a terrible tragedy befell the Johnstone family when five Tories or, Confederate deserters murdered Andrew. He “survived but an hour,” and the shocking attack was made worse when Johnstone’s eldest son, Elliott, took revenge on the killers and “seized a gun, and fired his father’s murderer.”¹³³ Elliott’s retaliation meant that the entire family were put at risk, which forced them to abandon their home in Flat Rock and start a new life in Greenville, North Carolina. Plunged into economic hardship, and with a growing family to feed, Mary Johnstone’s life had been destroyed and her wealth suddenly depleted.

Family members offered them shelter, but she refused to be dependent on them: “Our household of nine whites with spoiled servants I could not impose any where,” she wrote to her sister in October 1864. As an aside, it is interesting that Mary described herself as poor, but she still had a number of servants until the end of the war, by which time she took on many of the household chores herself, which reflected her fall in status but also the changes wrought by war.¹³⁴ By 1865, her large household slowly disentangled, her son had

¹³² Victoria E. Ott, *Confederate Daughters: Coming of Age during the Civil War* (Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale, 2008), 98-99.

¹³³ The Elliott and Gonzales Family Papers 1701-1898. Ralph Elliott to his mother, Mrs. A. Elliott, Charleston 15 June 1864. SHC.

¹³⁴ In a letter written on 9 July 1865, she notes how the servants have a change in attitude and that they have “entirely turned fool and they act as if we had always been their worst enemies.” Some of her old slaves have

joined the Confederate Army, and two of her daughters lodged elsewhere, with a woman in Baltimore. In her plight to keep her family together, Mary took a job as a teacher in Baltimore at The Edgeworth School for Young Ladies. Chiefly motivated by her desire to provide for her children, she also reported that her new duties had “gone very well indeed,” and that she gained satisfaction from her new role, reciting prayers to the children and caring for the sick.¹³⁵

Women’s teaching started to gain momentum during the Civil War years. For some women it was a source of liberation, for others a hardship to be endured in the context of a brutal and hard war. Few of these women openly challenged the social mores of the time, but nonetheless in taking on teaching roles outside of the home, even in the context of wartime, they were expanding and re-shaping their gender roles. For Josephine Varner, a young unmarried woman living in Indian Springs, Georgia, the reality of war was a bitter disappointment. Having lived with her parents up until that point, she had viewed the coming of war as an opportunity to achieve personal fulfilment, by studying in preparation for future employment at the war’s end. As she notes: “In the beginning of this war I thought what a golden opportunity it would be in the absence of our friends to improve myself reading and studying. I hoped that when the troubles were over to be ready for teaching, but now I am farther from attaining my object then ever, I have nearly lost all control over my mind,” she wrote, adding, “My life now is perfectly useless. I neither benefit myself nor anyone else.”¹³⁶ Josephine, like many unmarried upper-class women, had a deep-seated desire to prove that she was useful.

gone (Eleanor, Topsy and Lawrence). The new attendants (Ben, Grace and Edward) are described as ‘impertinent.’ In a letter to her mother 6 September 1865 she gives her a detailed description of her daily chores that include food preparation (making bread, skimming milk, cutting the meat), and being in the school room to hear the children learn.

¹³⁵ Ibid. Mary Johnstone to Emmaline Johnstone, undated.

¹³⁶ Josephine Varner Diary, 1 July 1862, The Edward Varner Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia (hereafter cited as GHS).

Her story therefore embodies the initial despondency felt by many other southern women at the start of the war, as they were unsure of what their new role was in the absence of the men folk.¹³⁷ For Josephine Varner, the Civil War signalled an initial crisis of identity and a feeling of dashed hopes for the future, and she sat mourning friends lost, ambitions thwarted. The social constraints of her position as an upper-class white woman seemed insurmountable at first, and she perceived herself as hemmed in by her social class and gender. It was a feeling that soon passed and it was replaced by a renewed vigour and a sense that she did have a range of options open to her. One of these was teaching. By February 1863 Josephine had realised her dream of finding a useful occupation as a teacher. She notes:

So far, I have enjoyed my little school very much. I love the children already, which makes me more patient and then they are bright and sprightly which makes it a pleasure to teach them. How long I shall be here I have not the remotest idea but so long as I can be useful and I am not needed at home and can keep my health, I shall stay.¹³⁸

Josephine's pleasure in her newfound employment and the satisfaction that she achieved from fulfilling a role that was considered "useful" to the wider community dovetails with the growing popularity of the Cult of Single Blessedness. Unmarried women from middle to upper-class, white families demonstrated that they were also true women, despite of their failure to marry. This suggests that rigid ideologies surrounding "true womanhood" were breaking down in the South before, during, and after the Civil War, and that alternative models of femininity were also growing in popularity. Barbara Welter posits that nineteenth-century women's gift annuals, that were widely circulated and read by women, were actively working to remove old stigmas attached to the unmarried woman.

¹³⁷ Laura Edwards suggests that women had to "confront the limitations and vulnerability of their legally and culturally defined dependence" as they waved their men off to war, and this resulted in feelings of despondency. See Laura F. Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 74.

¹³⁸ Josephine Varner Diary, 23 February 1863, GHS.

“Their stories showed maiden ladies as unselfish ministers to the sick, teachers of the young, or moral preceptors with their pens, beloved of their entire village.”¹³⁹

This shifting opinion on the role of single women was beneficial for women like Josephine. It enabled her to get involved in teaching without the fear of reprisal, or being accused of ‘challenging’ the existing status quo. Paradoxically, it also presented an opportunity for single women to be more independent, and to establish a life for themselves that did not include marriage, and motherhood. In a telling confession, Josephine confided in her journal about her plans to continue teaching: “I shall stay just as long as I wish, it may be wicked, it may be weak, but I greatly enjoy being mistress of my own movements, if I am to steer my own boat through life, God grant that I may do it cheerfully, as I feel that I can now.”¹⁴⁰ The contrast in Josephine’s attitude before, during, and after the Civil War, are illuminating in that she clearly equates teaching with a rise of self-esteem and with it, the burgeoning sense of autonomy.

Julia Tutwiler, an unmarried twenty-year-old white woman from Tuscaloosa, Alabama was similarly dispirited at the outbreak of war. She had initially expressed an interest in nursing in the war but her father had refused her request. Instead, he had demanded that she return home from boarding school in Philadelphia, and come to help him in his school for the duration of the war.¹⁴¹ In a letter to her sister Ida written retrospectively in 1872, Julia recalled how crestfallen she had been when she had returned home. In time, she came to appreciate the value gained in her work at the school. She admitted “the responsibility of helping father, and the necessary work in preparing the

¹³⁹ Barbara Welter, ‘The Cult of True Womanhood,’ 169.

¹⁴⁰ Josephine Varner Diary, April 21 1863, GHS.

¹⁴¹ Julia Tutwiler to Ida Tutwiler, 1872, Ida Tutwiler Papers 1836-1837 & 1872, SHC; Encyclopaedia of Alabama, <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org> Accessed 15/01/2010.

recitations brought with it some little order and system into my labours. Those three years [of teaching during the Civil War] I gained a great deal.”¹⁴²

The early experiences of working as a teacher in her father’s school helped to shape Julia’s future ideas on educational reform, and led to a fulfilling and satisfying career as an educational reformer and women’s right’s activist. In her career she demonstrated not only that she was useful, but also independent. Work therefore represented a broadening of opportunities for single women that continued in the post-war era. If we consider Barbara Welter’s argument, than great reformers like Julia had almost “absolved” themselves “from the necessity of marriage” by virtue of her good works as a single woman, that were “so extraordinary that she did not need the security or status of being a wife.”¹⁴³ Unmarried women strove to do their part and fulfil their role as “useful” single women, but they also helped expand and revise female roles. As Censer points out, “their very existence posited a role for women outside of the family and expanded the possibilities of female education, autonomy, and authority.”¹⁴⁴

Family still remained of extreme importance to unmarried women and it was often their sense of duty to the family that initially propelled them into the public arena to find work. Mary Harth was the widow of Dr. John Harth from Lexington County, South Carolina. Her stimulus to find work as a teacher in the post-war years was driven by her need to support her four children, (Corrie, Ella, Willie and Alice), following her husband’s death. Mary was desperate to rectify a financial transaction made in the war years concerning the sale of her slaves in 1861. Mrs. Watson had paid Mary \$1100 for them, which was considerably less than they were worth, but she had promised the rest (\$3400) in Confederate Bonds that later proved worthless after the war. Mary’s failure to receive

¹⁴² Julia Tutwiler to Ida Tutwiler, Tutwiler Papers, SHC.

¹⁴³ Barbara Welter, ‘The Cult of True Womanhood,’ 170.

¹⁴⁴ Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White, Southern Womanhood 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 275.

the money exposed both her lack of business sense but also her vulnerable position as a widow. Despite her desperate pleas to Mrs. Watson to remedy the situation, and her belief that she surely felt “honour bound to make the debt good,” Mary soon realised that she must find an alternative solution to help solve her mounting financial problems.¹⁴⁵ Mary described herself, as on the “brinks of despair,” unable to afford a home or a satisfactory standard of living, in lieu of the debts owed to her. Mary couched her request for money in the language of female dependency; replicating traditional gender models in the hope of gaining financial security from it: “Turn your heart to the unprotected widow and fatherless children,” she wrote in November 1865. “Do me justice and pay a poor woman her debt,” but to no avail.¹⁴⁶ Keen to find an alternative solution to her predicament, Mary demonstrated her stoicism and resourcefulness, by actively seeking employment. Realising that the debt would not be paid, she wrote a letter to the proprietor of an old schoolhouse, previously owned by her deceased aunt. Having heard that a position needed to be filled, Mary showed initiative and recommended herself for the vacant position to teach freedmen.¹⁴⁷ In doing so, she stepped out of her role of female dependent and exerted self-direction, in order to keep home and family together.

According to Anne Firor Scott teaching, “absorbed the largest number of upper-class single women in search of employment” in the war years and during Reconstruction.¹⁴⁸ It was a vocation that had quickly gained respect and popularity, and was less demanding than some other types of work. It also fitted in with traditional women’s roles as caregivers and nurtures that helped bring up the next generation. Significant numbers of single, southern women turned to teaching in the war years and in doing so highlighted their

¹⁴⁵ Mary Y. Harth to Mrs Watson, 26 November 1865, Mary Y. Harth Papers, SCL.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ She requests, “I am induced to ask a favour of you to give me the school. I have always felt the greatest interest, in their welfare and would feel it my duty as well as my pleasure to devote my time and attention to their intellectual moral and religious instruction. I am a widow with four children and a Communicant of our beloved Episcopal Church.” Mary Harth, September 1865.

¹⁴⁸ Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 118.

commitment to single blessedness. Mary Susan Ker was an unmarried woman from a planter class family in North Carolina who began teaching after the war to help support her family who had been financially devastated by the Civil War.¹⁴⁹ She was “a tower of strength” recalled Pierce Butler in his book, *The Unhurried Years: Memories of the Old Natchez Region*.¹⁵⁰

Throughout her life Mary took several jobs, both as a governess and later, as a teacher. It was not a life that Mary had planned for, or one that she had been expected to follow in her youth. She had been born, raised, and educated like so many other young women of her class, with the expectation that she would eventually marry and have children and a family of her own, thus emulating the traditional gender expectations of her race and class. However, the Civil War and the loss of life and fortunes altered the course of her life irrevocably. As Amy Holley observed, “Her expectations were completely unrelated to her actual future, her reaction to the difference is the story of individual perseverance,” and the development of personal agency born of pride and necessity.¹⁵¹

Her story also illuminates the difficult fit between the ideal of true womanhood and the changing reality of women’s lives in the Civil War era. Either the ideal had to become more accommodating, or it would shatter altogether. “Real women often felt that they did not live up to the ideal of true womanhood. Some of them blamed themselves, some challenged the standard, some tried to keep the virtues and enlarge the scope of womanhood,” which was the case for single women.¹⁵² Mary Ker’s life demonstrates a combination of all of the above: she was a woman who never married and as such hovered

¹⁴⁹ Mary Susan Ker has already been discussed previously; she was an important member of the Ker family, who worked as a governess and later a teacher in order to help contribute to her family. She also took on the guardianship of her two nieces, and later two great-nieces in the role of a maiden aunt.

¹⁵⁰ Pierce Butler, *The Unhurried Years: Memories of the Old Natchez Region* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1948), 106.

¹⁵¹ Amy L Holley, “But One Dependence: Mary Susan Ker and Southern Public Education, 1876-1914” (Master’s Thesis, The University of North Carolina 1989), 122.

¹⁵² Barbara Welter, ‘The Cult of True Womanhood,’ 174.

on the periphery of true womanhood (since marriage and motherhood were key components of the ideal). Yet she showed a maternal instinct and practical resourcefulness, in her role as the maiden aunt.¹⁵³ She challenged the negative stereotype of the dependent, single woman by helping to support her family in the post-war period, which demonstrated her capacity for embracing social change.

Mary worked at a number of schools including Public School No. 28 in Adams County, Mississippi in 1874.¹⁵⁴ Her work had a degree of flexibility that enabled her to care for her [adopted] children whilst facilitating her independence, although only just. By her own admission, Mary was not a natural teacher and she easily felt frustrated with the children and regularly bemoaned her, “black Mondays.”¹⁵⁵ Yet, when the opportunity arose for her to give up teaching and live as a dependent on her brother, she rejected his offer without hesitation, which suggests she valued her independence that working afforded her.¹⁵⁶ Mary often complained of being poor, but her circumstances were only relative to her previous position, growing up in a wealthy slaveholding family. Teaching wages were low for female teachers and remuneration varied from state to state, from \$24 per month in Carolina and Alabama, to \$34 dollars per month in Florida.¹⁵⁷ Mary was not paid well, and she constantly referred to the difficulties she had in making ends meet. For example, in the run-up to Christmas she found the lack of money a pressing concern, “Christmas is a sad time for me always, got my November check cashed, sent \$25 to

¹⁵³ Lee Chambers-Schiller, “‘Woman is Born to Love’: The Maiden Aunt as Maternal Figure in Ante-Bellum Literature,” *A Journal of Women’s Studies*, Vol.10:1 (1988): 34-43 & Christine Carter, “Indispensable Spinsters: Maiden Aunts in the Elite Families of Savannah and Charleston,” in Janet L. Coryell et.al., *Negotiating Boundaries of Southern Womanhood* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 111-133.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. There are various letters on the topic of Mary’s teaching. See also: William Ker to Mary Ker, 30 August 30 1874; Thomas Butler to Mary Ker, 21 October 1874; William Ker to Mary Susan Ker, 20 December 1874.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 14 May 1894.

¹⁵⁶ William Henry Ker to Mary Susan Ker, 4 February 1878, Ker Papers, SHC.

¹⁵⁷ Holley, “But One Dependence,” 39.

Natchez, paid the dentist, have no money to buy Christmas presents for the children and nothing to live on till next pay day.”¹⁵⁸

Teaching could therefore provide single women with several things: a small wage, a route to self-fulfilment, and an increased self-esteem. Sarah Walthall Rosier, though not from a wealthy, slaveholding family is a point in fact. Sarah grew up in Christiansburg, Virginia. She was a lover of music and literature and spent most of her life as a teacher in the South as well as in New York. Sarah was a complex, emotional woman, who spoke openly of the benefits and constraints of her life as a teacher. She valued the benefits of hard work and the security that she hoped it would bring to her family and to herself: “I am trying hard to earn a reputation that will enable me to command necessary comforts in my old age if God spares me,” Sarah wrote with a distinct air of independence.¹⁵⁹

However, she also recognised the hardships of working as a single woman, managing a large music department in the late 1860s. “It is not an easy task you know, and in fact in these days when the young ladies music is so exhibitional, it gives a teacher considerable anxiety and engrosses nearly the whole time to make ready for receptions.”¹⁶⁰ Yet, despite the hard work, and injustices of a woman’s salary, she talks with passion and enthusiasm about her work. “I always find teaching in a school so absorbing. I have I suppose some unnecessary pride about my pupil’s progress, and work very hard to make this apparent, which you know is difficult to do with the average talent and application,” which delivered joy and self-fulfilment.¹⁶¹ Sarah was a woman that aspired to gain perfection in her work. Inevitably, this resulted in moments of anxiety, concerning the nature of her work and the propriety of doing it as a woman.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 8 December 1894.

¹⁵⁹ Sarah Catherine Walthall to Fitz William Rosier, 1 May 1869, The Rosier Family Papers, VHS.

¹⁶⁰ Sarah Walthall to Fitz William Rosier, 28 November 1868, Rosier Papers, VHS.

¹⁶¹ Sarah Walthall to Fitz William Rosier, 25 April 1871 & 31 March 1874, Rosier Papers, VHS.

Members of the music department limited her workload due to her “delicate nature” as a woman, which she found frustrating, but she also talks about feeling unsexed because of her profession.¹⁶² In January 1870, seized with self-doubt, she wrote to her dear friend Fitz, her old music teacher, and later her husband:

With my natural gifts and opportunities, I think I should have been wiser, to make for myself a home, and take a place among the good society I could have commanded, than to devote myself to the independent life of teaching. In other words I think I ought to have married. I think the probability is that I will never marry now, and I much fear I shall not be so contented as an old maid as I expected to be.¹⁶³

She reflects in much the same way that Grace Elmore Brown had upon the realisation that the independence that she had so hankered for, was not quite as liberating as she had imagined it to be.¹⁶⁴ It is reminiscent of Laura Comer’s initial disillusionment in widowhood, when she had mused for so long about the freedom singleness would bring her. The every day reality of independence meant providing for themselves, with all of the anxieties that it entailed (rent to pay, low wages). In Sarah Rosier’s words it made “music teaching [in] these hard times [post war] a precarious dependence.”¹⁶⁵ Teaching might have been a precarious dependence for women in the post-war era; but it nonetheless represented a broadening of opportunities and a route to enhanced autonomy. Women had long been responsible for the care and education of their children and of their slave families. Single women had also played a key role as family helpmeets, maiden aunts, and as caregivers to the slaves. In this context, teaching was a natural extension of a woman’s traditional role but it also led to self-fulfilment, broader opportunities, and the blossoming of personal independence that had a liberating effect on women in the post-war South.

¹⁶² Hollins Institute 9 February 1875, Rosier Papers, VHS.

¹⁶³ Sarah Walthall to Fitz William Rosier, 20 January 1870, Rosier Papers, VHS.

¹⁶⁴ Sarah Walthall to Fitz William Rosier, 25 April 1871, Rosier Papers, VHS.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

Conclusion

In the three main areas discussed in this chapter: plantation mistresses, nurses and teachers, it is clear that the expansion of single women's working roles had begun in the Old South. Whilst planter class women were seldom gainfully employed prior to the Civil War, they had clearly demonstrated their burgeoning role within the family and domestic setting. From this starting point, a small number of single women had begun to tentatively venture beyond the home and family, when they were required to contribute to the household economy. From this conservative basis, single women opened up a doorway to greater opportunity, which was accelerated by war and its aftermath. As Cornelia Phillips Spencer wrote in "The Young Ladies' Column," in 1870:

Girls who are growing up at the present day ought not to compare themselves with those of even twenty years ago. Every year is adding to their opportunities and advantages. Door after door is being flung open to them, and the question must be...which shall I enter?...with the strongest conservative principles it is impossible to believe that they continue to move in the same narrow ruts as heretofore.¹⁶⁶

The blossoming of new opportunities for women was linked to the respect and admiration that they had gained during wartime. For women who were single, this reflected the growing popularity of the Cult of Single Blessedness. Paradoxically, the fact that unmarried women responded so positively to the demands of war, demonstrated their motivation to do "good" in their duty, to the family and, to the Confederacy.

In fulfilling their feminine roles as plantation managers, nurses, and teachers, single women upheld, but also, challenged gender prescriptions. They upheld them by taking on

¹⁶⁶ Cornelia Phillips Spencer in "The Young Ladies' Column," *North Carolina Presbyterian*, 1870, in Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 105.

roles that had their origins firmly rooted in the home and family – nurturing or educational roles – yet, they also indirectly challenged them by temporarily altering their character in order to carry out their roles competently. Phoebe Yates Pember spoke of the need to be “hard and gross” in order to be an effective Confederate war nurse. Slaveholding females described the difficult balance they faced in maintaining their ladyhood and managing their slaves.

Likewise, women who taught discussed the challenges of working in a classroom and the need to develop an authoritative voice in managing students. As Emory Thomas argues, “In terms of roles and models, Confederate women took a giant step away from the romantic ideal of the Southern Belle... The model Confederate female was a red eyed nurse with the unkempt hair or a war widow who succeeded as head of her household by force of will.”¹⁶⁷ As a result, these women helped to alter pre-conceived notions of singlehood by demonstrating quite publicly that wealthy, unmarried, white women of a certain class, could also be self-reliant, brave, autonomous but still “women.”¹⁶⁸ Consequently, all three categories of work explored in this chapter: plantation mistresses, nurses and teachers, show a definite correlation between a rise in women’s working roles and a flowering of personal autonomy.

¹⁶⁷ Thomas, *The Confederate Nation*, 229.

¹⁶⁸ Anastasia Simms: *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women’s Organisations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 2. Simms discusses the way in which the feminine ideal had been adapted in wartime in order to be able to incorporate the new attributes that southern women had had to develop in wartime.

Chapter Four: Female Friendship

This chapter focuses on female friendship between single women. It explores the way in which these friendships were encouraged to develop within a framework of a “women’s culture” that existed in the antebellum South.¹ From this conservative ethos, men and women were taught to operate in their separate spheres in their daily lives, and women were encouraged to form close and loving bonds with each other. These bonds began with the family and kin, but also extended beyond it, to include friendship between women.

The purpose of this chapter is to understand how single women’s friendships fitted in and operated within this framework of gender conventions. It will analyse the way in which these slowly began to change in the antebellum period, with the rise of companionate marriage and with new perceptions of female singleness. These changes in women’s lives were also further accelerated by the Civil War, which acted as a catalyst that provided single women with more opportunities to prove that they were useful to southern society, and in doing so gain more autonomy in their lives.² Yet, it would seem that as the friendships between single women began to mature beyond conventional limitations, and as women also gained more opportunity to expand their roles in the public arena of work, they started to

¹ There is much debate on the existence of a women’s culture. Those who agree that it existed include: Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1970); Carroll Smith Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1 (Autumn 1975): 1-29; Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood; 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18: (Summer 1966): 151-174; Linda Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 9-39; Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Women’s Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Suzanne Lebsock, *Freewomen of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 112-145. Those who disagree include Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress* & Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*.

² Jennifer Lynn Gross, “Lonely Lives are not Necessarily Joyless”: Augusta Jane Evan’s *Macaria* and the Creation of a Place for Single Womanhood in the Postwar South’, *American Nineteenth Century History* 2:1 Spring (2001): 33-52. For more information on how the war was a catalyst that provided single women with an opportunity to fulfil “single blessedness” see also, Lee Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty A Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780–1840* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1984), 5-7.

threaten the southern hegemony, who started to question the true “nature” of these female friendships, viewing them as possibly subversive. This chapter will argue that in the arena of female friendship, single women were able to exercise considerable autonomy in their friendships, but only within clearly designated limits. If they overstepped the invisible boundaries, or if the “nature” of their friendship came into question, then women discovered the confines of their personal autonomy. To re-cap, three main conceptual questions will be considered throughout this chapter: how friendships between single women developed in the nineteenth century, what the nature of these friendships were, and the extent to which they altered during the war and its aftermath, how perceptions of them changed and why.

The Development of Female Friendship

Conceptually, friendship was complicated in terms of how it was perceived within a broader culture, for perceptions shifted considerably in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, along with changing notions on female sexuality that began to question the idea of women’s asexuality.³ In a Victorian age that viewed women as “passionless,” women were able to conduct loving and intense friendships with the same sex because they were perceived as “sexless.”⁴ The same conduct with men was frowned upon, as men, unlike women, were charged with carnal passion, which made interactions with them far more fraught with danger and which discouraged some women from having heterosexual relationships at all. Women were repeatedly warned off public displays of affection with men, and encouraged to be shy and reserved in their relationships with the opposite sex, in order to avoid disrepute. They were taught to guard fiercely their reputations with men by

³ Martha Vicinus discusses the way in which single women embraced the idea of asexuality as a way to expand their sphere of influence, for example in religion. See Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 17-19.

⁴ Nancy Cott, “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850,” *Signs: Journal of Woman and Culture and Society* 4:2 (1978): 219-236.

withholding affection and thus demonstrating that they were “passionless” (and therefore ‘true’ women). Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues that the separate spheres ideology led to the development of a distinctive female culture and a form of personal agency, albeit within tightly controlled boundaries.⁵

Women’s historians continue to contest if this was a sign of agency or constraint for women. Either way, the existence of a thriving women’s culture, enabled unmarried women to find fulfilment – and to flourish – in their relationships with the same sex. Yet by the close of the century, the view that women were asexual was challenged with the rise of “sexology.”⁶ Women were no longer viewed as “passionless” and this revelation impacted upon society’s perception of “romantic friendship” and how remaining unmarried was viewed as a potentially subversive action for single women, especially if they continued to engage in loving same-sex friendships.⁷

There has been much debate amongst women’s historians who have been exploring female friendships since the 1970s and analysing the possibility and implications of a shared women’s culture. Pioneering scholars such as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argue that a “rigid gender-role differentiation within the family, between and within society as a whole” resulted in “the emotional segregation of men and women” that started in childhood in strong ties between mother and daughter.⁸ Rosenberg’s work focused on the North but her observations still have resonance for the South. In the North, the separate spheres ideology

⁵ Carroll Smith Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1 (Autumn 1975): 1-29.

⁶ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Women and her role in Nineteenth Century America,” *Journal of American History* 60 (1973/74): 332-356 & Carl Degler, “What Ought to be and What Was: Women’s Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century,” *American Historical Review*, 79 (1974): 1467-90.

⁷ Cott, “Passionlessness,” 219-236 & Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Love Between Women From Renaissance to the Present* (London: The Women’s Press, 1991), 157-177.

⁸ Carroll Smith Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual,” 9. Female friendship began at home, in the safe confines of the southern family, in the relationships between mother and daughter, sisters, female cousins and aunts. The loving bonds between sisters were used as a model for female friendship. These friendships often began at school. As young girls pined and missed their home and family they often dealt with this by replicating familial ties in their relationships with non-kin. These fictive ties mirrored the form, function and expression of sorority, blurring the boundaries between family and friendship.

was possibly a backlash to the forces of change that were sweeping through the country. Perhaps it was a conservative reaction to the market revolution, and the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation of American society and culture that resulted in the physical and emotional divide of the sexes. By saying that ‘true women’ belonged in the private sphere of home and family, men used women as an anchor of stability amid turbulent and changing times.⁹

In the South, however, the ideology of separate spheres was tied to notions of paternalism, chivalry, and honour which some have argued were becoming redundant by 1850.¹⁰ The drive for industrialisation and urbanisation whilst absent in the South did not detract from the fact that both North and South were motivated by a conservative ethos, at least when it came to defining gender prescriptions.¹¹ The North and South were distinct regions before, during, and after the war, yet they upheld the same dictum concerning women’s roles. The role of women in the North was linked to economic change, yet in the South the construction of the Southern lady was conversely tied to the maintenance and protection of a slaveholding society. It was part of a conservative worldview that made the experiences of southern women unique.¹² Race, class and gender were inextricably

⁹ Christopher Clark, ‘Household Economy, Market Exchange, and the Rise of Capitalism in the Rise of Connecticut Valley, 1800-1860,’ *Journal of Social History*, 13 (1979): 169-89; Thomas Dublin, ‘Rural Putting Out Work in Early Nineteenth-Century New England: Women and the Transition to Capitalism,’ *The New England Quarterly* 64 (1991): 531-573; James Henretta, ‘Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-industrial America,’ *The William & Mary Quarterly* 35 (1978): 3-32; John Lauritz Larson, *The Market Revolution in America: Liberty, Ambition and the Eclipse of the Common Good* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010); Winifred Rothenburg, ‘The Market and Massachusetts Farmers, 1750-1855,’ *Journal of Economic History* 41 (1981): 283-314; Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America 1815-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Alan Kulikoff, ‘The Transition to Capitalism in Rural America,’ *William & Mary Quarterly*, 46 (1989): 120-144.

¹⁰ On the question of honor see: Bertram Wyatt Brown, *Southern Honor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) & Edward Crowther, ‘Holy Honor: Sacred and Secular in the Old South,’ *Journal of Southern History*, 58:4 (1992): 619-636.

¹¹ For a discussion on the alleged differences between North and South see: Edward Pessen, ‘How different from each other were the Antebellum North and South?’ *American Historical Review* 85 (1980): 1119-1149; Robert. E. Shalhope, ‘Race, Class, Slavery and the Antebellum Southern Mind,’ *Journal of Southern History*, 37:4 (1971): 557-574; J. William Harris, ed. *Society and Culture in the Slave South* (London: Routledge, 1992), Chapter 1.

¹² Christine Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South* (New York & London: New York University Press, 1994), chapters 6 & 7.

intertwined in southern society and slaveholding women therefore had a unique role to play in upholding the southern, white hegemony – and with it the institution of slavery. The cultural construction of the “Cult of True Womanhood” therefore fused with very specific southern ideals of class and race. The net result meant that men and women occupied different spheres, or social spaces, and women’s role was designated as the guardians of the home and as the repositories of moral virtue. Women were told to accept their roles, and in doing so fulfil their duty as true women, raising the next generation, and restoring moral order amid turbulent times.¹³ The so-called separate spheres ideology maintained a social framework that kept women contained within the domestic sphere of home and family, and granted men the freedom to explore and dominate the public domain, which was particularly pronounced in the South.

Slaveholding women were encouraged to fulfil the role of the Southern lady, which involved living within tightly defined parameters of the home and family with limited social contact with men. For planter class women who remained single, it posed a considerable challenge in all areas as they were expected to demonstrate that they upheld the tenets of true womanhood, even though they remained single. The conservative ethos that separated the sexes also encouraged women to spend increasing amounts of time in each other’s company, with mothers, daughters, aunts, cousins, and nieces, but also between friends. This led to the formation of a unique female-centred world from which single women were able to nurture autonomous female friendships.¹⁴

For single women without a husband or a family of their own to protect them (and this could also extend to widowhood), these ties to other women were especially important. The close bonds that women forged with their own sex provided a special place for them to be themselves. In their relationships with other women, they discovered an arena in which they

¹³ Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 151-174.

¹⁴ Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual.”

could exercise considerable freedom of thought, desire, and action. In the antebellum period, female friendships were accepted and encouraged if they operated within certain boundaries. For example, women must understand that family came first and that their friendships must not interfere with this rigid hierarchy. Even though they were not married, single women were expected to fulfil very specific role assignments in the southern family as caregivers, helpmeets, surrogate mothers, or maiden aunts.¹⁵ From these roles they often gained considerable kudos and inadvertently, a degree of autonomy. Unlike married women who gained automatic recognition in southern society because they had married, single women had to carve out an alternative identity for themselves by proving that they were actively contributing to the home, family, and community. In light of this, women actively sought approval from others in order to bolster their own reputations as unmarried women living a life devoted to single blessedness, which elevated their social persona, and in turn, enhanced their level of personal autonomy. The avenue of female friendship represented another way in which unmarried women could gain recognition for their contribution to society. Furthermore, it was an opportunity to feel the closeness and warmth of a personal relationship that lie outside of the family.

Form and Function of Female Friendship

Friendships manifested themselves in many different forms. Some friendships were fiery and passionate, others sororial and tender. They could be brief or last throughout a lifetime. This was reflected in the eclectic nature of friendship in childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and for some, in lifelong ties. Alice Baldy, a young and vivacious woman from Georgia was an example of the most passionate or intense form of female friendship and as such, it challenged existing gender conventions. Alice often mused about her

¹⁵ Lee Chambers-Schiller, ““Woman is Born to Love”: The Maiden Aunt as Maternal Figure in Ante-Bellum Literature,’ *A Journal of Women’s Studies*, Vol.10: 1 (1988): 34-43.

desire to set up a home and school with her much loved friend, Josephine, also referred to as Josie, or “Joe” Varner. Her ultimate goal was to live with her sisters *and* with Josie, and to share in the running of their own school, as they were both trained as teachers.¹⁶

Alice’s “isolated dream” spilled onto the pages in many of her love letters to Joe Varner, and in doing so revealed much about the romantic friendships that some women in the nineteenth century shared.¹⁷ “I want so much to get our school underway – yours and Mary J’s and mine – Amanda and Mary J would keep domestic affairs straight – and you and I could manage quite a number of children. I look forward to that as the happiness in store for me,” Alice confessed in 1870-71.¹⁸ Her thoughts were not just a passing fancy, but a more permanent dream that helped sustain her throughout her life course, even though, it was a dream that was never to reach fruition. Hers was not an easy vision to put into practice; there were many practical, financial, and familial barriers that she had to overcome to turn her dream into a reality. Whilst it was a goal that was never to be fulfilled, the fact that it existed at all, underlines key points about the nature of female friendship in the nineteenth-century South. This included the intention to set up a home with a close, female friend who was also single which seems revolutionary for their time and place.

Alice Baldy and Joe Varner’s case is indicative of a desire to set up a more permanent residence with another unmarried woman, and for them to live as a couple in an all-female household. It moves far beyond conventional, residential living arrangements for single women, who typically lived in their families’ homes and demonstrates that single women actively sought alternatives to traditional living

¹⁶ Alice and Josephine attended La Grange College in Georgia together.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Knowlton used the term “isolated dream” to refer to Alice Baldy’s daydreaming about setting up a home with Joe Varner. Elizabeth Knowlton, “ ‘Only a Woman Like Yourself’ – Rebecca Alice Baldy: Dutiful Daughter, Stalwart Sister, and Lesbian Lover of Nineteenth-Century Georgia,” in *Carryin’ on in the Lesbian and Gay South*, John Howard et al. (New York & London: University Press, 1997), 40.

¹⁸ Ibid.

arrangements that far surpassed sharing with an unmarried or widowed sibling.¹⁹ This echoes Grace Elmore Brown's desire to set up an "establishment independent of everyone else," which also demonstrated autonomy.²⁰ Anya Jabour argues the main reason why female friendships between unmarried women were *allowed* to exist was because they were viewed as *only temporary* in nature and they had little hope of gaining any real permanency. Therefore, because their friendships were perceived as only temporary in nature they did not pose as a threat to the existing social order. Besides, as Alice's case illustrates, single women often lacked the material resources to make their vision a permanent reality. As a result, unmarried women were given limited freedom to pursue their female friendships because they were perceived as transitory, non-sexual, and without the ability to become permanent.²¹ Yet, in the post-war period, as single women's working roles expanded further, and they accumulated the material resources to turn their dreams into a reality, new theories on female sexuality emerged which questioned past beliefs that women were asexual and pure in nature. These new ideas cast female friendship between unmarried women in a new light, and caused single women to conceal friendships in a way that had not been necessary previously.

Alice Baldy discovered the constraints of her status as an unmarried woman when she tried to turn her vision of sharing a home with Josephine Varner into a reality. By attempting to do so, she threatened the patriarchal structure of southern society and subverted the conventional definitions of southern womanhood. Therefore to re-iterate, female friendship – particularly in the form of "romantic friendship" – was accepted on a temporary basis. Yet once it clearly challenged the existing structures of southern society, or failed to operate within its conservative framework, then it was immediately perceived

¹⁹ Anya Jabour, *Female Families and Friendship in the Old South* (Tampa: University of Florida Press, 2009), 86-103.

²⁰ Marli F. Weiner (ed.), *A Heritage of Woe: The Civil War Diary of Grace Elmore Brown 1861-1868* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1997), 40.

²¹ Jabour, *Female Families*, 86-103.

as a threat, which gave rise to new ideas and interpretations of femininity. Alice discovered this to her peril when she was unable to set up a home with Joe because it was blocked by a number of obstacles, some personal, others financial, or familial. Ultimately, in Alice's case the benefits of single blessedness were a double-edged sword, in that it allowed her considerable autonomy in some areas of her life, but restricted her in others. For example, in order for her to demonstrate that she was devoted to a life of single blessedness as an unmarried woman, she must demonstrate that family was her first priority that won her respect and a good reputation. Yet, in achieving this, she sacrificed her long-term desires because her family became a burden. It ties in with Lee Chambers-Schiller's argument regarding single women in the American northeast that family helped define single women's roles but it also hindered them from achieving more long-term personal ambitions, because of the heavy demands often made on them.²² This was true for Alice who, from the age of twenty-one shouldered considerable responsibility within the family. Her father died in 1856 and with a large family to care for, and a mother who was disabled, she was the one who had to work as a teacher to help the family. For Alice, her siblings were little help to her. Two of her brothers were dead, another an "n'er do well," one sister was almost blind, and the others were still young children or had already married.²³ In this context, Alice was stuck in the predicament of having to prove her usefulness to her family, whilst quashing her own private desires for an alternative life, in much the same way as Grace Brown.

Unmarried women did not have to want to set up a home together in order to demonstrate the importance of female friendship. Georgian-born slaveholder and single lady, Mary Telfair, admitted that happiness for her, centred on "friendship." Even though she lived quite happily at home with her unmarried siblings, Mary admitted on a number

²² Lee Chambers-Schiller. *Liberty A Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780–1840* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1984), 2.

²³ Knowlton, "Only a Woman Like Yourself," 40.

of occasions that it was her dear friend, Mary Few who she felt closest too. Mary referred to Few as her “Siamese twin” or “second self” – a relationship so strong and intense that neither time nor distance could pull it apart.²⁴ Mary deliberately blurred the boundaries of family and close friendship by employing the language of fictive ties in her description of her relationship with Few.²⁵ She elevated her to an untouchable status by comparing their relationship to that of co-joined twins. In this way, she marked out their relationship as closer, and more intimate, than any other she experienced during her lifetime.

Mary Telfair and Mary Few had been childhood friends in the early 1800s, and had later boarded together at school, and then remained friends for life. Although the pair rarely met (typically they met in an annual visit when Telfair visited Few in the North, and even these visits ceased for during the Civil War) and the pleasure and significance of their times spent together was enough to sustain a lifelong friendship. At the same time Mary knew that her friendship with Mary Few occupied a very specific place within southern society. She recognised this, and accepted it for what it was, rarely attempting to over-extend it. The fact that the pair remained single and conducted a lifelong friendship with each other was in itself a milder form of resistance to gender conventions, even as early as the 1830s. This suggests that the process of change was already underway in the pre-Civil war period in terms of a desire to revise or expand gender models.

Mary Telfair placed a high value on her friendships with other women – and particularly in her attachment to Few. She also recognised that happiness was intimately tied for her with the close relationships that she forged with other like-minded women and not just with her family. As she confessed in her commonplace book, “Happiness is the natural design of all the world and everything we see done is in order to attain it. My

²⁴ Mary Telfair to Mary Few, 26 January 1840 & 5 April 1840 in Wood, *Mary Telfair to Mary Few*, 197 & 199-202.

²⁵ Charles A. Ibsen, & Patricia Klobus, “Fictive Kin Term Use and Social Relationships: Alternative Interpretations,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 34: 4 (November 1972): 615-620.

imagination places it in Friendship [sic]. By friendship I mean an entire communications of thoughts, wishes, interests and pleasures being undivided; a mutual esteem which carries with it a pleasing sweetness of conversation and terminates in a desire to make each other happy without being forced to run into visits, noise and hurry which serve to trouble, rather than compose the thoughts of any reasonable creatures.”²⁶ It is telling that Mary’s understanding of what constituted a good friendship echoed the same fundamentals of companionate marriage that was gaining prominence by mid-nineteenth century. The idea that women should be happy and deserved to be happy in their marriages was a new phenomenon. This increased awareness of, and access to companionate marriages encouraged some women to stay single or wait longer to get married.²⁷ Single women seem to have used companionate marriage as a template for their own female friendships and spoke of the need for mutual affection, emotional support, good communication, mutual dependency, and a desire to make each other happy.

For slaveholding women who were passionate about their female friends, little would prevent them from keeping in close contact with each other. If women did not live in close proximity to one another, the best way for them to keep in touch was by letter writing. Friends, both young and old, spoke of the advantages and disadvantages of remaining single – and letters offered them a perfect arena in which to express their opinions. Eliza Travers Lewis confabulated with her cousin Eliza Holladay on her “exceeding liking” of a life devoted to single blessedness.²⁸ Mary Jones Taylor wrote regularly to her friend Mary Sharp Jones of Liberty County, Georgia. The two had been friends since childhood and they had attended a seminary for young ladies in Philadelphia together. Mary Jones had

²⁶ Mary Telfair Commonplace Book 1822-29 in Charles J. Johnson, Jr. *Mary Telfair: The Life and Legacy of a Nineteenth Century Woman* (Savannah: Frederic C. Beil, 2002), 115.

²⁷ Anya Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 89, 158, 167, 174, 179 & 212.

²⁸ Eliza Holladay to Elizabeth Travers Lewis, 22 May 1865, Holladay Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society (hereafter cited as VHS). She was responding to Elizabeth’s letter in which she had declared “her exceeding liking for the delightful state of single blessedness.”

relocated from Georgia when her father had taken up a new post as secretary of the Board of Domestic Missions of the Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Yet, the girls' correspondence continued until the start of the Civil War, until Mary Taylor would have been in her late twenties. They proved to be close confidantes but eventually their friendship burnt out.²⁹ Even when intense female friendships died out, important lessons were learnt that helped girls and women consider alternative gender models for their future lives. North Carolinian, Anna Cameron greatly admired her music teacher during her time spent at her female seminary. "I am perfectly in love with Augusta, she is beautiful and charming," she wrote in 1863. The love affair though, was evidently one-sided, and the object of her affections, Augusta Stevenson, became engaged and later married. Yet, Anna instead "translated her intense attachment for her music teacher" into a lifelong desire to remain single and "planned for an independent future" by supporting herself. Her case was not unusual, and other young schoolgirls also drew inspiration from their teachers, and saw it as an alternative model for living a future life of single blessedness.

Mary Taylor also wrote to Mary Jones about her devotion to single blessedness a year after the latter had married. "I am more devoted than ever to spinsterhood," wrote Mary Taylor in September 1858, adding jovially, "Did you ever hear of one who bore the illustrious cognomen of Mary Jones who was not a blessing to society at large," which reiterated the important connection between the perception of female singleness and the degree of autonomy that they achieved in their daily lives.³⁰ Another young woman from Virginia wrote to her friend Frances Bernard, begging her to remain single. "Let me live and die in single blessedness," she vowed "I can imagine no state more miserable than to

²⁹ Anne Cameron Diary, 19, 20, 21 November 1863, SHC and in Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) 60-71.

³⁰ Robert Manson Myers, *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press), 1576. Her comment was a playful joke as the ladies shared the same name. Yet, even in jest the reference to being a "blessing" and proving useful remains. Mary Taylor never-married and spent most of her life on the family plantation in Worcester County, Maryland. Mary Sharpe married at the age of twenty-two and had 5 children.

be joined for life to one who has not affection and confidence.”³¹ Frances clearly underlined her views on only marrying for love (companionate marriage) or else, her desire to remain single. This concurs with the wider historical discourse on marriage and the impact that it had on southern women choosing to delay marriage or to reject it altogether if they did not find a suitable mate.³²

Sarah Morgan, a young, nineteen-year old from Baton Rouge (and later New Orleans), Louisiana echoed her strong feelings on marriage versus singlehood. She abhorred the idea of marriage, and boldly confessed to Captain Huger that, “Women who look to marriage as the sole end and object in life are those who think less of its duties; while those who see its responsibilities, and feel its solemnity, are those who considered it by no means the only purpose in life.” Then added, “If women only considered for one minute all of the awful responsibilities that hang on that solemn I will!”³³ Women who chose to remain single had clearly considered the benefits and drawbacks of marriage, and decided that it was for them an unhappy match. Grace Elmore Brown, who spoke so hostilely about marriage, described her independent plans for the future in her diary and claimed that she wanted to devote her life and will “to find interest without the appendage of a husband,” and true to her word Grace remained unmarried for life.³⁴

South Carolinian single lady, Hannah Wylie wrote regularly to her married sister, Mary Mobley. She made candid observations on the institution of marriage, with particular reference to weddings that she or her sisters attended. After attending a friend’s wedding in May 1865, she wrote that the bride “Katherine looked beautiful, what a contrast to her choice,” making it plain that marriage was an undesirable state for her, unless it was a

³¹ Anya Jabour, *Female Families and Friendship in the Old South* (University of Florida Press: Tampa, 2009), 90.

³² Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 89-96.

³³ Sarah Morgan Journal, 23 May 1861 in Charles East, *The Civil War Diary of Sarah Morgan* (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 1991), 81-82.

³⁴ Marli. F. Weiner (ed.), *A Heritage of Woe: The Civil War Diary of Grace Elmore Brown 1861-1868* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1997), 40.

companionate one. By emphasising how poor Katherine's choice was, she insinuated that she had settled for second best, which was far worse, in her opinion, than remaining single.³⁵ The fact that these unmarried women were so frank and outspoken in their letters demonstrates a confidence and ease in their own beliefs, and also in their discourse with other women. As Amy Wink has observed, writing was a form of personal agency for nineteenth-century women and was thus, "a moment of action and agency despite the culture that encourages passivity" in the South and beyond.³⁶

Planter class women relied on writing and receiving of letters to keep friendships alive when physically separated by time and place. To receive a letter from a close friend was an important demonstration of their friend's affection, as well as a sign of reassurance that they were being thought of regularly. Mary Telfair anxiously awaited Mary Few's letters and often grew ill tempered if she had not heard from her. Mary describes herself as "very dependent" on Few for "intellectual nourishment" and as the only "cure for the heartache," that she felt when she had not heard from her.³⁷ In a letter written to Few in March 1829, Telfair wrote self-depreciatingly: "You are the labourer, for one of your letters are worth half a dozen of mine... Yet I with all my dullness 'thick upon my head' attempt to answer your letter."³⁸ She was not alone in seeking frequent reassurance that her friend, Mary, loved her. Alice Baldy implored in a letter to Joe Varner, "Will you love me always Josie, even when I am old? Will you promise to be with me as long as I live?"³⁹ Also, Miss. Moore, having heard nothing from her friend and cousin, Eliza DeRosset, wrote to her complaining that, "Never my dear cousin plead the exhaustion of my patience as an excuse

³⁵ Hannah Wylie to Susan and Mary Wylie, 4 May 1851 on the topic of Katherine's wedding. Adding, "Aunt Kate was not much pleased with the match she said it is [some] thing she would never have anything to do with unless it was to advise if she thought they were making a bad choice," Wylie Family Papers, SCL.

³⁶ Wink, "She Left Nothing In Particular," 29. Southern society celebrated piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity in women. These four cardinal virtues formed the benchmark of the Cult of True Womanhood. Therefore, the freedom to express oneself in writing marked an opportunity for self-expression, self-fulfilment and personal agency in its most primal form.

³⁷ Mary Telfair to Mary Few, 16 December 1828, in Betty Wood, *Mary Telfair*, 82.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁹ Alice Baldy to Josephine Varner, 29 April 1870, VHS.

for your laziness – for surely friends who love as we do can find enough to fill one small sheet of paper?”⁴⁰

Therefore, women harnessed their passion for letter writing in an effort to cultivate and sustain close ties with loved ones, that included parents, siblings, cousins, but also female friends. They were physical manifestations of their heart-felt affection for another woman and an important means of communication that helped maintain friendship, even when friends lived many miles apart. Anna Moore expressed the comfort she received when she opened a letter from her cousin, Magdalen Mary DeRosset. “Thanks to you for your kindness, I feel grateful for your affection and value it more than you can imagine. Every letter from you my beloved cousin makes me love you more and more. All those who wish to keep the flame of friendship bright and burning possess and effectual antedate [sic] against its becoming extinct by means of lazy intercourse.”⁴¹ These sentiments resonate with Mary Telfair’s confession that she would rather “employ a rusty nail as a pen” than “forego the pleasure of confabulating” with Mary Few.⁴² Friendship, such as theirs, provided women with the forum in which to safely express their most intimate thoughts and desires, without fear of criticism or rebuke.

Furthermore, it offered unmarried women an outlet to share in the various ways in which they were making themselves useful to their families and it offered them a chance for encouragement and praise. Whilst women’s journals were a safe place for women to establish their identities, letter writing provided further scope for them to test out the boundaries imposed on them by society. There was a strong sense that single women wanted to prove that they were actively contributing to society or that they were ‘useful’,

⁴⁰ S. L. Moore to Eliza DeRosset, 25 July 1825, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC. The DeRosset Family were from Wilmington, North Carolina; they owned a rice plantation in Brunswick County, North Carolina. Eliza Ann (1802-1888) and Magdalen Mary (1806-1850) were the unmarried daughters of Armand John DeRosset (1767-1859) and his wife, Catherine Fullerton DeRosset (1773-1837). For more information in the family history see The DeRosset Family Papers, 1671-1940 (in particular the inventory), SHC.

⁴¹ Anna Moore to Magdalen DeRosset, 13 September 1830, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC.

⁴² Mary Telfair to Mary Few, 3 December 1813, William Few Collection in Johnston, *Mary Telfair*, 109.

almost as if to dispel any pre-conceived notions that they were redundant women and a drain on their family and society.⁴³ Therefore, women's letters and diaries often spoke at length about how busy they were or how useful they had been. It was also an opportunity for elite, white women to use their skill of literacy to show "women's agency in the midst of social constraint" by having their voice heard by a sympathising friend.⁴⁴

This theme of usefulness is crucial. It reverberated throughout women's letters and diaries almost as if it were a badge of honour through which they might gain recognition and inadvertently, enhanced personal agency. Mary Telfair mused that she wanted to be "amicable and if I can, a useful old maid."⁴⁵ Ellen Mordecai spoke of "making herself useful" during her stay with relatives in Richmond, Virginia in 1817, and Sally Hill praised Virginia Holladay for her "usefulness" in the family: "You must have your hands full with the babies – I am sure I could not make myself so useful."⁴⁶ These women merged words of support with praise and recognition, as well as speaking candidly about their desire to be reunited with their friends again soon.⁴⁷ In addition to proving that they were useful, women were also keen to prove that they were virtuous, busy and fulfilled.

Domestic novelist Augusta Jane Evans wrote to her friend, Rachel Lyons that "You have no idea how many claims I have on my time and attention. My correspondence is

⁴³ Chapter one explored various stereotypes that existed in the nineteenth-century South.

⁴⁴ Amy Laura Wink, "She Left Nothing In Particular: The Autobiographical Legacy of Nineteenth Century Women's Diaries" (PhD diss., Texas A & M University, 1996), 17.

⁴⁵ Mary Telfair to Mary Few, 13 October [no year], William Few Collection in Johnston, *Mary Telfair*, 88. Single women always felt that they had to prove themselves, in a way that married women did not.

⁴⁶ Ellen Mordecai Diary, 11 November 1817, Mordecai Family Papers 1649-1947, SHC. Ellen Mordecai (1790-1884) was an unmarried writer, teacher and governess. The Mordecai's were a Jewish family from North Carolina. See also Emily Bingham, *Mordecai: An Early American Family* (New York: Hill & Wand, 2003), 82. Bingham noted that the family "seemed they would remain single yet together, always a queer, old fashioned, stiff set." Sally Hill to Virginia Holladay, [undated] circa. 1857, Holladay Family Papers, VHS. In a subsequent letter Sally again writes how she dreams of meeting with Virginia again and fantasises about "sweet walks and sweet talks" with her. Sally Hill to Virginia Holladay, 8 February 1858, Holladay Family Papers, VHS.

⁴⁷ Sally Hill to Virginia Holladay, 20 May 1857, Holladay Family Papers, VHS. "My dear Virginia, I sometimes feel as if I would give any thing in my possession if I could only see you for a little while – you have no idea of how impatient I feel and when shall we meet I cannot tell." Also refer to Joyce Broussard, "Female Solitaires: Women Alone in the Lifeworld of Mid-Century Natchez, Mississippi 1850-1880." (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1998), 12. Broussard argues that all women were relegated to a "servant ideal" whereby they devoted themselves to the patriarchal order of life, but by doing so they achieved agency and self-fulfilment.

absolutely formidable and you would pity me if you knew the number of unanswered letters staring at me in the face to write.” She speaks of being “constantly engaged” writing newspaper articles, and attending to her familial duties (which is again illuminating because she is single).⁴⁸ On one occasion Augusta talks of taking “charge” of her sisters, Carrie and Sarah, helping them with their studies, which involved having to devote time and patience to listen to them read on their course of history and philosophy that required “at least half a day” of her time. During the war she even supervised them alone for the duration of two weeks, again illustrating how useful she was.⁴⁹

Eliza DeRosset wrote to her unmarried sister, Magdalen Mary that “if I do not write for often dear Mag, you must not, by any means attribute it to indifference or want of affections,” “I have really so many correspondents and so little time to devote to that that I fear some, who do not know me may accuse me of forgetfulness.”⁵⁰ Likewise, the aging Miss. Ker penned in her diary “school or other work all day long, no time to myself, no privacy.”⁵¹ Josephine Varner measured her own self-worth by how successful or busy she had been, or by how much she had read, worked or corresponded with family or friends.⁵²

When a friend, particularly a close friend or kindred spirit recognised those achievements by writing about them in the affirmative in their letters, this generated a feeling of external affirmation and a sense of well-being (in line with the cult of single blessedness) but it also led to an enhancement of personal agency.⁵³ Augusta Jane Evans in spite of her many responsibilities – writing, home, and family – clearly felt comfortable in telling her friend about the pressures of her daily life and admitted openly to her friend

⁴⁸ Augusta Jane Evans to Rachel Lyons, 8 December 1859; Augusta Jane Evans to Rachel Lyons, January 4th 1860, quoted in Rebecca Grant Sexton, *A Southern Woman of Letters: The Correspondence of Augusta Jane Evans Wilson* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 3 & 13.

⁴⁹ Augusta Jane Evans to Rachel Lyons, 29 May 1860 & Augusta Jane Evans to Rachel Lyons, 4 January 1860 in Sexton, *A Southern Woman*, 3 & 13.

⁵⁰ Eliza DeRosset to Magdalen Mary DeRosset, 2 July 1825, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC.

⁵¹ Diary of Mary Ker, 9 October 1895, Ker Family Papers, SHC.

⁵² Josephine Varner Diary, Varner Papers, Georgia Historical Society (hereafter cited as GHS).

⁵³ Broussard, Joyce, “Female Solitaires,” 12.

Rachel that: “It helps me marvellously to know that you do remember and love me so kindly.”⁵⁴ Mary Telfair wrote to Few in delight upon receiving news from her, as she wanted to “know that you still loved me” and Alice Baldy implored Joe Varner, “Will you love me always Josie, even when I am old? Will you promise to be with me as long as I live?”⁵⁵

The notion of friendships having permanency was clearly important in single women’s lives and paralleled the blood ties between sisters. Women often modelled their friendships on sororial ties. The comfort, solace, and good feeling derived from a close friendship replicated that of family, and unmarried women cherished the warmth of a dearly loved friend in much the same way that they appreciated a close sister.⁵⁶ Women often translated this affection, by adopting the language of “fictive kin,” and referred to close female friends in familial terms, such as “sister,” particularly in their letters and journals.⁵⁷ There were two main reasons for this. Firstly, it tied into the idea of an explicitly female-centred world, in which men and women occupied such distinct social spaces that it encouraged women to forge close ties not only with female relatives but also with female friends, that is women who they saw as “sisters of the heart.” By adopting familial terms, women fostered and re-inforced the idea of a distinctive women’s culture that was in keeping with their strong ties of affection. Secondly, “sister” was a safe, platonic term; it conveyed closeness and longevity, without passion. It transmitted a sense of belonging that was as natural and as prized as blood ties, and it also stressed its longevity and permanence in women’s lives. A sister, after all, was a lifelong companion

⁵⁴ Augusta Jane Evans to Rachel Lyons, 14 June 1860. Sexton, *A Southern Woman*, 13.

⁵⁵ Alice Baldy to Josephine Varner, 29 April 1870, Varner Papers, GHS.

⁵⁶ The relationship between sisters has been explored in Chapter two. Brief reference will be made to specific case studies here also as a means to demonstrate how women often modelled their female friendships on the relationships that sisters shared.

⁵⁷ Carol Lasser, “Let Us Be Sisters Forever: The Sororal Model of Nineteenth Century Female Friendship,” *Signs* 14:1 (1988): 158-181. Lasser focuses on the relationship between Antoinette Brown and Lucy Stone, two lifelong friends, who later became sisters through marriage. She highlights the frequency with which the two women repeatedly used sororial terms to refer to one another, long before their marital alliances gave them basis for justifying the use of such a term in reality.

and a blood tie that could never be broken. In close female friendships it therefore seemed like an appropriate term for conveying the depth and endurance of a treasured friendship.

The language of sisterhood laces in and out of the writings of American women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and highlights the loving bonds shared between non-kin. Female friendships weaved themselves into the fabric of everyday life, from an early age, “mothers and daughters, aunts and nieces, cousins and female friends often hugged and kissed” in public without risking subverting the social or moral order.⁵⁸ Girls learnt that physical displays of affection, such as hand holding, embracing, and giving each other small tokens of their love, was a casually accepted part of southern society, with no freakish undertones. In school, particularly in female seminaries, girls fashioned exclusive relationships with a roommate, bedfellow, or sweetheart. They chose pet names for each other (for example, Mary Ker was referred to as ‘Molly’) and shared rooms and beds, took walks together, and gave each other little gifts or wrote notes and letters to one another, which reinforced the cliques they had formed.⁵⁹ Girls talked of being “in love” or having “a crush” on a fellow pupil, and if that pupil had left the school they spoke of the difficulty of being “torn” apart.⁶⁰

Occasionally, pupils targeted their affections on a female teacher who they looked up to admiringly as a positive role model for their future lives.⁶¹ Their strong attachments were considered a normal part of growing up and also, as a useful training ground in preparation for marriage, which inevitably followed for the majority. Historian Melinda Buza discusses the way “same-gender networks” prepared “men and women for the

⁵⁸ Christie Ann Farnham in Charles. J. Johnson, Jr. *Mary Telfair: The Life and Legacy of a Nineteenth Century Woman* (Savannah: Frederic. C. Beil, 2002), 110.

⁵⁹ Farnham, *The Education of a Southern Belle*, 148.

⁶⁰ The reference to the word “torn” actually comes from Josephine Varner’s description of losing her dearest friend, Sallie Carter, when she announced she was to marry Mr. Butler. Though she reports feeling pleased for her that she had made a good match, she also noted wistfully, “Yet how sad it makes me to give her up, although I can love her the same, I feel as used of her loving affection, yet I feel she is being torn from me.” Josephine Varner Diary, 1 March 1864, Varner Family Papers, GHS.

⁶¹ Farnham, *The Education of a Southern Belle*, Chapter 7, esp. 156.

companionability and commitment of marriage but also served as a forum for reservations about the other gender.”⁶² However, the conventions and expectations that were accepted in youth were different from those that governed adult friendships.⁶³ Drew Gilpin Faust argues that girls understood relationships with other women within a framework of language customarily associated with heterosexual love. Such language, words or deeds were not considered deviant (until the end of the century) but supposedly represented “a sensitivity and authenticity of feeling celebrated in this sentimental mid-Victorian era as appropriate to true friendship as much as true love.”⁶⁴

However, some women took this a stage further, each taking on a male or female gender role within their same-sex friendship. Lizzie Grove, a young woman living with her family in Missouri, wrote frequently to her close friend and cousin, Laura Brumback. Rather than employing sororial terms, Lizzie went even further and donned the language of heterosexual love, referring to Laura as “my dearest husband,” in their private correspondence.⁶⁵ Likewise Alice Baldy’s letters to Josephine echo an almost masculine persona, and a desire to look after her sweetheart, which evoke a reversal of gender roles in their correspondence. In 1870 she wrote: “I love you and I want to take care of you – I would do it if I could, and save you contact with anything rough, or harsh,” almost as if

⁶² Melinda S. Buza, “‘Pledges of Our Love’: Friendship, Love and Marriage among the Virginia Gentry, 1800–1825,” in *The Edge of the South: Life in Nineteenth-Century Virginia*, eds. Edward L. Ayers and John C. Willis (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 16.

⁶³ William R. Taylor & Christopher Lasch, “Two ‘Kindred Spirits’: Sorority and Family in New England” 1839-1846 *New England Quarterly* 36:1(March 1963): 23-41.

⁶⁴ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 142-145, esp. 144. In the nineteenth century era women would not recognise the rigid distinctions between homosexuality and heterosexuality. “Intense – even seemingly erotic – female friendships co-existed harmoniously with male –female courtship and even marriage.”

⁶⁵ Jabour, *Female Families*, 86. Lizzie Grove resided in Missouri and Laura Brumback in Illinois, though she was originally from Virginia. They were “faithful” lovers who remained unmarried. Their correspondence and the language they used, adds a further dimension to same sex friendship that mirrored heterosexuality rather than deliberately covering it up.

she was fulfilling the role of the husband and Joe fulfilling the role of the dependent wife who needed protecting, which was a deliberate subversion of her own gender.⁶⁶

In the letters and diaries of the single women in this study there can be little question that the language employed between close friends were loving, passionate and demonstrative in tone yet should it be interpreted differently if the females involved were permanently single? Consider again the correspondence between Alice Baldy and Joe Varner. Whilst many letters remain to bear testament to Alice's feelings of romantic love for Joe, the same was not true of Joe's. It is clear from Alice's letters to her that Joe was forever anxious to keep the nature of their relationship shielded from the public glare. Josephine seemed nervous that anybody other than Alice should see her letters, to such an extent that she made Alice burn them. The reason why Joe felt the need to destroy any tangible evidence of the relationship she had shared with Alice Baldy suggests that she was fearful to protect herself from public scrutiny and certainly, it seems to have worked as she was revered by all those who knew her or by those who had heard of her.

These letters, written in the 1870s, were written at a time when notions of female asexuality started to come into question. Previously held notions of female passionlessness became unhinged by new philosophies and medical interpretations – sexology – that claimed women were in fact sexually active in their relationships with each other.⁶⁷ This re-branding of romantic friendships between women as socially deviant caused unmarried women to retreat and to hide their relationships from the lens of public scrutiny. It was almost as though, after the war, women had adopted a new identity, and as they showed

⁶⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁷ As Lillian Faderman argued in her book, *Surpassing The Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from The Renaissance to the Present* (London: The Women's Press Ltd: 1991), 240: "Love between women had been encouraged and tolerated for centuries – but now that women had the possibility of economic dependence, such love became potentially threatening to the social order. What if women would seek independence, cut men out of their lives?" Therefore as Faderman argues, "Love between women was metamorphosed into a freakishness, and it was claimed that only those who had such an abnormality would want to change their subordinate status in any way," 240-1. The rise of the sexologists therefore came about at the same time as women tried to assert their autonomy and therefore could be interpreted as a reaction to it. It could be used as a powerful weapon to stop women from gaining independence from men.

themselves to be more capable in and out of the public arena, they were considered as more of a threat to the social order.

Women started to hide their most intimate thoughts, which included love letters to other women. This perhaps accounts for Josephine's insistence that Alice destroy her letters. Thus, it is hardly surprising in this context that Josephine felt uncomfortable about her written declarations of love for another woman, either because she feared that they would be misconstrued, or perhaps because they revealed more erotic desires that even she was unsure of, and feared might become public. Again this illustrates the dichotomy between the private and public worlds that women inhabited and the way in which established cultural ideals tried to contain single women's autonomy well into the late nineteenth century.

Often women continued to show that they were respectful of the tight gender conventions that controlled them, if only as a means to enhancing their personal autonomy. Romantic friendship between women was accepted mainly because it was controlled, but nonetheless women often manipulated it to their best advantage. According to Sheila Jeffrys, it was "precisely women's lack of any possibility of an independent life which made their passionate friendships acceptable as [they were] no threat to the heterosexual structure in early nineteenth-century society."⁶⁸ Yet, as soon as the opportunity for economic independence increased this was reflected in the limitations of female friendship.

For women who were unhappily married, and wished that they were single, the love and support of female friendship was also of heightened importance. Not all marriages conformed to the new companionate ideal and many women spoke of their high hopes for marriage juxtaposed with the disappointing reality of married life. Laura Beecher Comer was one such woman. Born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1817, she

⁶⁸ Sheila Jeffrys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930* (London, Boston & Henley: Pandora Press, 1985), 112.

moved south after the death of her first husband, Mr Hayes. In 1848, she married James Comer, a cotton planter in Alabama, and the couple settled in rural Georgia. In her diary she recalled the early days of her marriage to James, and the lonely reality of living “alone with him year after year” thereafter.⁶⁹ For Laura, it was a life she endured but rarely enjoyed. Her expectations of marriage and the desire to have a family of her own remained permanently unfulfilled, and she regularly confided in her diary about her feelings of isolation, living in Columbus, Georgia, with only a “barbarous” husband and his “insolent, disobedient Negroes” for company. Laura’s daily life was far removed from the companionate marriage that some women enjoyed.⁷⁰

Hers, by contrast, struck a nightmarish comparison to the ideal. “It is a terrible life!” she confessed in her journal in 1862. “Who can appreciate or understand anything about such a life – but a woman who marries a Bachelor; who has lived with his Negroes as equals, at bed and board!”⁷¹ Comer made clear in her diary that the man she had married failed to provide her with the love, warmth and companionship that she so desired and she longed to be single once again. She felt undermined as a woman living amongst the slaves, who she noted her husband treated “as equals” to her, rather than elevating her to a higher position in the social hierarchy, like a woman of her race and class would have expected to be. Comer was clearly disillusioned with marriage on several levels; and found it insulting to her femininity that her husband failed to provide her with protection, provision and respect. Consequently, it was in her friendships with other women that she found love, warmth and acceptance, that were so sorely missing in her relationship with her husband. Even though she felt isolated and alone in her marriage, on a plantation surrounded by blacks, the letters from her close friends had sustained her. Laura Comer valued the fact that her friends “understood and appreciated her.” She felt warmth and affection in her

⁶⁹ Laura Beecher Comer Diary, January 20 1862, SHC.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

relationship with them because they willingly shared with her, “heart, love and affection,” that she was deprived of in her relationship with her husband.⁷² Laura Beecher Comer often bemoaned the harsh treatment she received from her husband, but immediately after his death she initially appeared frozen, unable to move forward with her own hopes and dreams because of her ongoing ties to their plantation.⁷³

Finally, she achieved her goal and demonstrated her autonomy, travelled north to visit her family in New York and Connecticut, and then voyaged to Europe. As she herself realised on 16th June 1872, “A new life seems to dawn upon me,” and on 26th November 1872 she confessed, “I have been a slave to my business affairs for too long. I have taken care of others and neglected myself – it is high time I should attend to myself.” It was a promise that she acted upon, as she set herself free from the constraints of the past. In January 1899, by now an old woman, Comer reflected on the importance of friendship in her life. The “flame of friendship is well burnt on the altar of my heart,” she wrote about her Lilla, whom she knew and loved deeply. Your letters are “more precious than gold to me,” she wrote to her.⁷⁴ Laura Comer spoke of a sense of well-being from her female friendships; they helped her to endure an unhappy marriage, and later to cope with widowhood.

Evidently, friendship between southern women was highly prized. It came in many different forms and had several important functions. It gave women a sense of self-fulfilment and a chance to be heard, or to share their honest opinions on marriage versus singleness. It was an opportunity to let someone else know how useful or how valued they

⁷² Laura Beecher Comer Diary, January 8 1899.

⁷³ There are a number of entries where she talks about the difficulties she has managing her plantation in Alabama as a widow in the years just proceeding the Civil War. On 7 November 1867 she writes, “At my plantation in Alabama surrounded by the usual annoyances of free Negroes! Indolent, unused to their new situation, are they not intolerable?” Adding, “I am striving with all my might to wind up all my worldly goods and business of every kind. In long to be relaxed and ready to depart.” Laura Beecher Comer Diary Entry, Series 1, Vol.2, Comer Family Papers, SHC. Depressed, downtrodden and weary, Comer is on the brink of despair, looking for death as a way out of her troubled life. However, by 1872 the tone of her diary alters and she appears to be a transformed woman.

⁷⁴ Laura Beecher Comer Diary, January 8 1899, Comer Family Papers, SHC.

were to others, which connected to the need for external affirmation to feel worthy in society. Single women often seemed to form collectives or female “networks” which provided them with the support and company of other like-minded women who were also single. The loving and supportive network of kin and non-kin was essential for building confidence and self-identity. Many single women had a wide circle of female friends. Mary Ker from Natchez, Mississippi, valued her female friendships, and kept up a rich and detailed correspondence with many women over her lifetime, including Lou Connor, Amelia Choppin, and Lou Butler.

Mary was clearly well respected by her friends, and was described by one friend as “my very particular friend,” and by another as “my much loved Mary.”⁷⁵ Mary did not rely on any one individual friendship in the way that Baldy or Telfair clearly did. Instead, she invested a great deal of her energy into her family, particularly the surrogate family that she had created with her nieces, and also in a larger social network of other like-minded women who lived in the Mississippi region. One friend, concerned for Mary’s poor health later in life, and isolated herself as a widow, wrote to Mary encouraging her to come and set up home with her. “I want you to come and live with me,” implored Mrs. Reid in March 1880, when Mary would have been approximately fifty years old, “If I am successful in getting my business arranged to suit me I shall have plenty for us both and if I do not you can teach and get 35 dollars a month here and your company would be the greatest imaginable comfort to me.”⁷⁶ Mary’s correspondents were virtually all women (bar

⁷⁵ Unknown to Mary Susan Ker, 12 June 1864 & Helen Wells to Mary Susan Ker, 9 December 1874, Mary Ker Papers, SHC.

⁷⁶ E.M. Reid to Mary Susan Ker, 28 March 1880, Mary Ker Family Papers, SHC. Mrs. Reid’s husband had recently died, and she described how she spent the days alone, whilst her grown up sons were at work and her younger daughter, Annie was at school. Financially she was reasonably well off, and therefore her case is worth noting as an example of a widow showing personal autonomy by requesting that Mary, a spinster could live with her and share a home, thus solving Mary’s financial difficulties and providing company for Mrs. Reid, a lonely widow. Though Mary did not take Mrs. Reid up on her offer, it shows another alternative living arrangement that friends considered. Josie Ker, Mary’s sister-in-law also offered Mary a home ten years prior, concerned as she and her husband, (Mary’s brother William Ker) were over the amount of hours she was

family), and many of them kept up a rich and detailed correspondence with her for over sixty years, proving how much they valued Mary as a friend or confidante.⁷⁷ Mary belonged to a tight-knit circle of female friends, most of whom were single, slaveholding women who shared similar backgrounds to hers. Friends in this circle included Anne Clay, Sarah Cecil, Catherine Hunter and Anne Cumming (who eventually married) and in her letters to Few she talked about each of them individually.

Most of the group remained permanently single, though some friends did marry. It is clear from Telfair's assessment of each of their characters that some were more highly esteemed by her than others. Anne Clay was "very much admired" due to her "dignity, grace, intelligence and vivacity;" Catherine Hunter was "satirical," Sarah Campbell was "amiable, pious and benevolent" and Mrs. Bryan was "fascinating."⁷⁸ Telfair described a "coterie" of like-minded women, who met weekly to enjoy oyster suppers, needlework, light reading and stimulating conversation.⁷⁹ Hers was a vibrant picture of a strong and well-connected support network of unmarried women who lived in Savannah, enjoying the advantages that city living brought to them in their position as wealthy, but unattached single women.

Historians such as Christine Carter have noted that these networks tended to be more prolific in the urban centres in the antebellum South, with evidence of elite, slaveholding women flourishing as members of a wider community, in cities such as Charleston and Savannah. This was presumably because such networks were easier to maintain in more

teaching in order to support herself. Also see, Josie Ker to Mary Susan Ker 15 December 1873, Ker Family Papers, SHC.

⁷⁷ Equally there are many letters written to Mary from family members, that again illustrate how loved, valued, esteemed and respected she was within the extended family. Her identity is tied up in both.

⁷⁸ Mary Telfair to Mary Few, 20 October [1833], William Few Collection, in Charles Johnson Junior, *Mary Telfair: The Life and Legacy of a Nineteenth-Century Woman* (Savannah: Beil Publishers, 2002), 101; 103, 104 & 105.

⁷⁹ Johnson, *The Life and Legacy*, 99.

cosmopolitan, urban centres than in rural areas.⁸⁰ Networks probably developed a little later in rural areas, or they may have just been maintained in different ways – mostly by regular correspondence or by extended visits, rather than being sustained by more regular meetings. Virginian Eliza Holladay for example, lived with her four unmarried sisters at Prospect Hill Plantation Spotsylvania County. Though the four sisters shared together in a loving and contented household, they still spoke of their joy that visits from family and friends brought them, referring to the latter’s visits as a “delightful intercourse” that helped to “renew” “friendship and love” for each other when apart, which was fairly typical in the antebellum and post-Civil War era.⁸¹ These visits kept female ties fresh and invigorated, and helped them stand the test of time that was essential for maintaining close bonds.

War and its aftermath

With the build up to secession, war and its aftermath, letter writing continued to be an active forum in which single women could express and debate their most intimate thoughts, feelings or desires. The Wylie sisters frequently talked politics in their letters, swapped opinions on political lectures they had attended, and made it plain what their political views were. The sisters went against the tide of pro-secession feeling in their own family, and even in their state of South Carolina, and Hannah stated that slavery was “a dirty business,” even though her father was a slaveholder.⁸² She talked about political figures, the Mexican War, the annexation of Texas, and, of course, the Civil War.⁸³ Harriott Middleton, again from

⁸⁰ Christine Jacobsen Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness: Unmarried Women in the Urban South 1800-1865* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

⁸¹ Eliza Holladay to Elizabeth Travers Lewis, August 1849, The Holladay Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society (hereafter cited as VHS).

⁸² Hannah Wylie to Mary Wylie, 17 November 1853, Wylie Family Papers, SCL. Hannah’s comment was made in reference to the Negro auctions (she refers to them as Negro speculations) taking place nearby.

⁸³ Her sister, Susan, who was eighteen years her senior, likewise discussed a frenzied pro-secession rally in Lancaster in June 1851; “It was more like a corn husking than anything like I can compare it to... beast Rhett

South Carolina, was a single woman and ardent secessionist who was quite prepared to share her views on secession and war. She described how the white, slaveholding women of New Orleans “vomited secession” despite being surrounded by Union troops during the war, and Susan refers to Lincoln as “vulgar.”⁸⁴ Caroline Kean Davis, a single woman teaching at a school in King Williams County in Virginia wrote that she had taken time out to attend a four-day State Convention in April 1861 during which she had heard “interesting and exciting debates from various members.”⁸⁵

The novelist, Augusta Jane Evans spoke candidly about the fact that she was an ardent secessionist in her letters; she spoke out in her correspondence with General P.G. Beauregard and Confederate congressman J.L.M Curry about specific battles in the Civil War. Rebecca Sexton said that Evans wrote “freely and confidently” in her letters with these two high-ranking men, and gave them “advice concerning everything from battle plans to government politics.”⁸⁶ Yet she was not considered as a threat to male authority and she made it very clear that by expressing her opinion she was not interfering but simply fulfilling a “sacred duty” to assist his country during the exigencies of war. Evans took special measures to protect her reputation from the “ridicule or wrath of those who contend that

went forward ...and he went illustrating the advantage of secession... and his gaping gang gulped it down... Then came Adams amidst the loud cheering of the hord and the greater part knew no more than the animals that brought them there.” University of South Carolina Programme Guide 16-19, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina.

⁸⁴ Harriott Middleton to Susan Middleton, 26 October [year unknown] as published in, “Middleton Correspondence, 1861-1865,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 63: 4 (October 1962): 204-210. Harriott wrote about various subjects including female propriety. Even though she was single she continued to uphold the importance of showing “propriety” and a good “self image.” In reply, Susan Middleton referred to the behaviour of her sister Emma who she accused of a lack of decorum in her desire to in the round dancing at a local social gathering. Susan paints herself as the good southern matron, offering advice to her younger sister. Alarmed at her sister’s unladylike confession of wanting to round dance, she confessed to Harriott, “That Emma should wish to set aside propriety and delicacy in this way mortifies me deeply, but I have no doubt she will do it, for she is as least as self-willed as I am.” Susan Middleton to Harriott Middleton, January [date unknown] 1863. Ibid. The letters between the Middleton girls offer a window into the social scene in Charleston during the Civil War. Because their letters are so candid it makes it easier to infiltrate and understand their social situation during the war.

⁸⁵ Caroline Keen Davis Journal, 25 April 1861, VHS.

⁸⁶ Augusta Jane Evans to Curry, 20 December 1862 in Sexton, The Introduction to *A Southern Woman*, xxx.

women have no interest” in politics or in the battlefield.⁸⁷ For example, she did not sign her name to some of the articles that she wrote, as a means of protecting her reputation from any abuse from those who considered her efforts as too intellectual, which was a sign of masculinity. Evans defended her political discussions with Beauregard and Curry and commented that she felt “compelled to step out of her feminine role” out of a strong sense of “patriotic duty” to the South. Augusta recognised the additional freedom she had, linked to her status as a successful writer, in expressing her opinions that were valued by high-ranking men, such as Beauregard. Yet, she remained watchful, and protective of her position as a single woman of the elite class perhaps fearing that if she overstepped gender conventions she would be unpopular and lose the additional independence that she courted. Women valued being useful and liked to be seen to be doing so within their designated sphere and did not like to be seen as overstepping those invisible boundaries. However “free” Augusta may have seemed in her correspondence with men, in reality the social prescriptions of womanhood restricted her to operate within her designated space. Therefore, her “freedom” was circumscribed in her relationships with men in a way that it was not with her intercourse with women.

The exceptional circumstances born of war granted her additional freedoms to overstep her normal boundaries as a woman, which inadvertently led to larger share of female independence.⁸⁸ However, she remained “reluctant to transcend the proper sphere of womanhood, and always fearful of encroaching upon the prerogatives of your sex,” by engaging in inappropriate activities for a woman. This theme is picked up in her written work and novels. Evans celebrated women’s contribution to society, but also noted that those contributions should be restricted to certain “noble” professions that did not draw them away

⁸⁷ Ibid., 97.

⁸⁸ Augusta Jane Evans to G. Beauregard, 19 August 1863 in Sexton, *A Southern Woman*, 97.

from their home and family.⁸⁹ Clearly, single women of different marital statuses actively sought approval for their contributions to family and community; it brought them contentment and a sense of self-satisfaction.

During the Civil War, ladies gift annuals and prescriptive literature praised the benefits of female friendship upholding them as pure and noble, which reflects the fact that at that time they continued to be viewed as innocent attachments that fitted in with conventional models of womanhood. Unmarried women spoke with unbridled delight regarding their friendships with other women but often emphasised their temporary nature. Bettie Lyell's valedictory address in Petersburg, Virginia in 1863, wistfully reminisced that "As a band of sisters many and joyous have been the hours we have spent together [at college], and it may be, that the future has no gift in store to recompense us for their loss," now that the special time in their lives had finished. Bettie vocalised a common truth that many southern women accepted as fact, the friendships that girls enjoyed during their youth were different from those in later life. They were seen as a transitory phase that girls usually grew out of as they reached maturity, and as such were considered as good preparation for marriage.

The Civil War acted as a catalyst and shone a bright light on the number of women who were now single (due to widowhood or non-marriage). With 260,000 Confederate men dead, and many more injured or disabled, increasing numbers of southern women faced life alone as single women. These women often found themselves in altered economic, demographic and social circumstances. Therefore, they often had to expand their sphere in order to adapt to the new realities of their every day lives that reflected the new social order

⁸⁹ Ibid. See also: Jennifer Lynn Gross, "Lonely Lives are not Necessarily Joyless": Augusta Jane Evan's *Macaria* and the Creation of a Place for Single Womanhood in the Postwar South', *American Nineteenth Century History* 2:1 Spring (2001): 33-52.

that surrounded them.⁹⁰ Drew Gilpin Faust argues how “young and unmarried women often turned to one another not just for companionship but for the passion and feeling more generally associated with heterosexual attachments,” due to the lack of men, which led to a re-interpretation of gender conventions and challenged previous held notions that women were passionless.⁹¹ In this way, the war can be interpreted as acting as a catalyst for accelerating a change of opinion on how female friendships were perceived. It accelerated trends that were already underway in the antebellum period by covertly confronting and challenging gender conventions in the form of more passionate – or sexual – female attachments.⁹²

It was not uncommon for widows and spinsters within the same family to live together. The Holladay sisters shared a home together throughout their lives, Mary Telfair lived with her widowed sister Margaret, and Susan and Harriet Wylie, two unmarried sisters from South Carolina shared a home. In the Mordecai family, widows, spinsters and married couples lived together, pooling resources and supporting each other in every day life.⁹³ This became particularly pronounced in the post-war period, as the war highlighted female singleness in an unprecedented way. In Alabama alone there were 800,000 widows, three fourths of whom were said, “to be in want of the bare necessities of life.”⁹⁴ With many more southern women facing altered living arrangements due to widowhood or permanent spinsterhood, a change in residential living patterns represented an increasing threat to the existing social order. As a result “defeat and post-war conditions

⁹⁰ For a discussion of the post-war period and its effect on elite, slaveholding women see Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 185-6.

⁹¹ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 145.

⁹² Ibid. Faust cites the example of Nannie Haskin of Tennessee, who observed rather disapprovingly in 1863, “I have noticed girls carrying on over each other kissing each other and so on. I think it is right foolish sometimes.” Other diarists noted in their journals how the standards, or behaviour, of young girls was far less concerned about adhering to rigid gender conventions.

⁹³ The Holladay Family Papers, VHS; The Wylie Family Papers, SCL & The Mordecai Family Papers, SHC.

⁹⁴ Laura F. Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 97.

in the South undermined the patriarchy” and some southern women criticised men for their failure to protect them, or to provide for them from the brutalities of war.⁹⁵

As new opportunities (and challenges) for single women began to open up that reflected the altered social scene, particularly in terms of paid work, then women’s chance of achieving greater independence and permanency in terms of their long-term friendships rose. This went beyond setting up homes with other female family members (typically with other unmarried sisters or cousins) and instead focused on female only residences that included sharing a home with close friends. As a result, in the era of Reconstruction and moving into the late nineteenth century, women’s friendships were interpreted within an altered framework that mirrored their increased personal agency in other areas of their lives. This is reminiscent of Joe Varner’s request that Alice Baldy burn the love letters she had written to her for fear that they would be interpreted in a negative light.

However, this additional pressure did not result in the decline of same-sex friendships between unmarried women. There were many literary devices that single women used to cloak their passionate desires for each other in their letters and in the conduct of their same-sex friendships – in school, in adulthood, and in society. They had already done this, to some degree, in the antebellum era, but in the post-Civil War era it became more important in order to protect women from possible criticism, or accusations of subversion. Superficially, it would seem that single women directly benefited from the notion that women were passionless, for the first half of the nineteenth century at least. It enabled them to nurture close and loving same-sex friendships albeit within clearly defined limits. By the late 1870s, elite, white women’s lives had begun to change more dramatically, with new opportunities developing outside of the family unit (such as paid

⁹⁵ Ibid., 97.

work). The war had helped to accelerate the rate of change in their public and private lives and it was at this stage that female friendship started to come under closer scrutiny. The friendship between unmarried women started to be perceived as a threat to the social order, in a way that they had not been previously. As Lillian Faderman argues “Love between women had been encouraged and tolerated for centuries – but now that women had the possibility of economic independence, such love became potentially threatening to the social order. What if women would seek independence, cut men out of their lives?”⁹⁶ As a result, the “love between women was metamorphosed into a freakishness,” which dovetailed with new interpretations on female sexuality that no longer assumed that the love between women was non-sexual.⁹⁷

Conclusion

Female friendship between single women developed out of a distinctive female culture in the antebellum South. These friendships were accepted and enjoyed by single women in a myriad of different forms – from long distance letter writing, or annual visits, to more frequent meetings with a close friend, or friends, in the form of a single women’s network. Research indicates that women prized their female friends, and even dreamt of setting up a more permanent home with them, if it was possible. They often mirrored sororial bonds, and at times surpassed them, such as in the case of Mary Telfair who described Mary Few as her “siamese twin.” Regardless of the nature of female friendship, it is clear that single women felt a sense of ease in their friendships with other like-minded women. They felt comfortable in disclosing their private thoughts on numerous topics such as marriage, singleness, family, and their personal aspirations. This was because a close friend could bolster self-esteem, and validate a single woman’s sense of usefulness, which

⁹⁶ Faderman, *Surpassing the Love Of Men*, 240-1.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

coalesced with the rise of the cult of single blessedness that measured an unmarried woman's worth by the contributions that she made to her family and community.⁹⁸

In the antebellum period women exercised considerable freedom in their same-sex friendships due to the fact that they were regarded as non-sexual. Thus from a conservative basis, women achieved a limited degree of autonomy and independence in their relationships outside of marriage. The war further expanded women's roles in terms of their place in the public sphere. It highlighted single blessedness in a way that further promoted alternative gender models for southern women, and made non-marriage a blessing rather than a curse.

Consequently, the war accelerated the rate of social change, and painted female singleness in a more positive light. However, it also underlined the growing autonomy of single women, which altered the way in which female friendship was understood. By the late 1870s, it was no longer viewed as simply "temporary" but instead metamorphosed into a more permanent threat to the social order of the South. As the nature of female friendship came into question in the post-war period, unmarried women became more cautious of openly declaring their love for other women, and moved cautiously within the gender conventions prescribed to them in order to preserve their growing autonomy.

⁹⁸ Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband*.

Chapter Five: Law, Property and the Single Woman

Mary Reid, a slaveholding mistress from Halifax County North Carolina, filed a divorce petition to the General Assembly of the state of North Carolina in 1832. Having suffered what can only be described as a horrific catalogue of marital abuse, Mary finally turned to the courts for protection.¹ As a southern lady, her plight was complicated by her class, race, and social position, which meant that her elevated status as a lady was dependent on her submission to her husband's will. In a patriarchal society, in which she occupied a privileged social status compared to lower class whites and blacks, the Southern lady had a reputation and a stake in the system to protect by remaining married.² Up until the Civil War, planter class women understood that the relative advantages of their class were tied to slavery and to their veneer of ladyhood.³

As Elizabeth-Fox Genovese argues, the Southern lady "accepted the dominance of men but cultivated her own sense of honour, which depended heavily on the embodiment of her class."⁴ However, as Mary Reid's case illustrates, there were occasions when married women had to step outside of their subordinate role in order to protect themselves when their husbands had failed them. They were compelled, in certain circumstances, to reject the authority of their husbands in favour of the overarching patriarchy of the court in the hope of the protection that it might offer them.

¹ Divorce Petition of Mary Reid to General Assembly of North Carolina Petitions Analysis Record (hereafter PAR) No. 20184216. For reasons of brevity, these sources hereafter will be referred to as Race and Slavery Petitions Project (RSPP) and cite the petitioner's details as given in the Petition Analysis Record (PAR). Visit the Project's Website at http://library.uncg.edu/slavery_petitions/index.asp.

² Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 194-210, esp. 195 & 203.

³ Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 12-13.

⁴ Ibid.

Mary Reid argues that her husband, Elias Reid, married for her property, which included “a very large personal estate consisting mostly of slaves,” and that he cared little for her well-being or happiness.⁵ He had “banished” her “from the house and placed her at his Negro quarters” – insulting her status as a lady by making her live amongst “Negroes” and “depriving her of all the conveniences,” including adequate food provision.⁶ Therefore, as a result of Elias Reid’s failure to protect and provide for his wife, she was granted special dispensation to challenge his authority by seeking the higher protection of the law.

The process of obtaining a divorce was still fraught with hazard, and cases regularly hinged on up-holding conventional views about femininity: the need for female protection; her vulnerability to cruelty; the necessity of financial independence for her own sake, and her children's welfare, in the face of neglect, drunkenness or cruelty. Paradoxically, this resulted in greater female autonomy, as women benefited from an ideologically conservative impulse that initially operated to protect hapless women and their families within the domestic setting, but that ultimately opened the door for women to enter into the public arena.

This chapter explores the complexities and consequences of legal change and property rights for single women in the nineteenth-century South. The chapter analyses a cross-section of legal petitions that were filed by planter class women across the South and in doing so, tracks the ways in which voluntary and involuntary singleness was affected by the social, political, economic and legal changes that occurred throughout the nineteenth century. For the purpose of this chapter, approximately one hundred petitions have been examined. The petitions form part of the ‘Race, Slavery and Free Blacks Petitions’ taken from southern legislatures in the period 1777-1867. Most of the petitions examined in this

⁵ Divorce Petition of Mary Reid to General Assembly of North Carolina, RSPP.

⁶ Ibid.

chapter fall between 1820-1870. These include divorce petitions, requests for a widow's dower share or to move property and sell land / slaves in the event of a husband's death. The collection includes petitions from the fifteen-slaveholding states.⁷ This chapter explores petitions from various states including Tennessee, Alabama, South Carolina, North Carolina, Texas and Florida.⁸ The chapter analyses how important changes in the law led to the broadening of the grounds for divorce laws, or to fairer property settlements for widows in the antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction eras.

Historians such as Jane Turner Censer argue that the nineteenth century saw the liberalisation of divorce laws for southern women which concurred with the social, economic and political changes during the Civil War and post-war eras.⁹ Evidence suggests that the broadening of divorce laws, rather than being a sign of liberalisation that favoured women, were motivated by a conservative impulse to protect women, and favour men who wanted to divorce their wives.¹⁰ Similarly, the Married Women's Property Acts, which allowed married women to retain property in marriage in the form of a separate estate, were driven by a conservative ethos to safeguard the property of wealthy, slaveholding families, but also to protect women.

The chapter is split into three main sections: the first section examines divorce or what is referred to as *voluntary singleness*. The second section analyses the legal status of a "femme sole" and a "femme covert" which were highlighted in earlier discussions. This helps reveal how a single woman's legal status may have been an uncomfortable fit with her social status as a single woman. All southern women operated within a framework of

⁷ A large number of the petitions are from Virginia (7 /23 reels) and North and South Carolina (8/23 reels).

⁸ Originally, I had planned to use a sample of thirty-five cases, six from each state. This number was quickly revised, to include over one hundred cases.

⁹ Jane Turner Censer, " 'Smiling Through Her Tears': Ante-Bellum Southern Women and Divorce," *American Journal of Legal History* 25 (1981).

¹⁰ Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1992). Bynum discusses how the changes in divorce law favoured men in North Carolina, which again suggests that the changes in divorce laws actually found their roots in conservative soil that were there to protect women, not to liberate them.

gender conventions that curtailed their behaviour in the nineteenth-century South. However, they were also able to manipulate their class privilege in manifesting feminine or ladylike behaviour in order to gain the sympathy of the courts. This is reminiscent of Anya Jabour's work on young women in the Old South who acted as "quiet revolutionaries... in waging a form of ideological – if safely invisible– warfare" by both accepting, but also quietly rejecting, the ideological constraints that threatened to destabilise their elevated race and class position in the southern hierarchy.¹¹ The third section explores widowhood or *involuntary singleness*, as married women became single through circumstances beyond their control (the death of their husband).

Voluntary Singleness

Margaret Selina Oliver knew only too well the importance of property. As a slaveholding widow from Lowndes County, Alabama, she demonstrated her willingness – and personal agency – in accepting the role of co-administrator of her deceased husband's estate. As Margaret noted, it consisted of a "large real and personal estate consisting of lands and slaves and other personal property to a large amount," which she managed admirably, and from which she claimed her due.¹²

However, after Margaret's subsequent marriage to second husband, Creed Oliver, the administration of the property fell into his hands. For Margaret this must have been a mixed blessing, handing over power and control of an estate that she had effectively

¹¹ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 13.

¹² Divorce Petition of Margaret Selina Oliver to Southern Chancery Division of Alabama, Records of the Circuit Courts, Final Record Chancery Court, RSPP, PAR No. 20184216.

By "her due" I am referring to a widow's dower share, which was one third of her husband's real estate. This will be discussed in more detail later on. The role of an administrator was similar to an executor of a will. Suzanne Lebsock notes, "The administrator was obliged to dissolve partnerships, to collect and pay debts, to pursue litigation, to distribute the estate to the proper heirs, and to manage it in the meantime." The decision of whether to take on the task of administration or co-administration was a choice a widow could either accept or decline. By accepting, widows held responsibility, but also power, over their husbands' assets. For further information refer to Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784 -1860* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), 120-121.

controlled, and also, having to trust that he would manage it in a manner that suited both their interests, placed her in a vulnerable and dependent position. Consider then, how disappointed Margaret must have been, and how vulnerable she must have felt, when her second marriage started to turn sour. Re-marriage was fraught with pitfalls, legally, economically, and personally, and a second marriage (or third) had serious economic consequences for a woman and her dependents unless a woman had taken precautionary measures to safeguard her property in a trust or separate estate.

Margaret recalled with regret “the cruel and barbarous treatment” that Creed began exhibiting towards her. He threw “open knives” with “great force and violence” and even threatened her life with a “loaded pistol” on one occasion.¹³ Fearing that her safety (as well as her property) was in jeopardy, Margaret galvanised into action and appealed to the court for its protection. The urgency of Margaret’s personal circumstances propelled her to make public what would otherwise be a private family matter.¹⁴ Her case seems to personify what Norma Basch described as “the gambit of the desperate,” in that divorce represented the final avenue open to women who found themselves in extreme or desperate circumstances.¹⁵ When a woman was threatened with loss of property, financial devastation, or if she felt that she was in grave personal danger, she was compelled to take drastic action. Sometimes, women were able to reach out to their family or to the local community for help; others appealed to the legislative body to validate, and then act on their claims.

Basch argues that divorce had little to do with the desire for female autonomy but argues that the chief motivation was protection, provision, and personal survival.¹⁶ If we

¹³ Divorce Petition of Margaret Selina Oliver, RSPP, PAR No. 20184216.

¹⁴ Francelle Blum, “When Marriages Fail: Divorce in Nineteenth Century Texas” (PhD diss., Rice University, 2008), 15-16.

¹⁵ Norma Basch, “The Emerging Legal History of Women in the United States: Property, Divorce and the Constitution,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12:1 (1986): 107.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

follow this interpretation, Margaret Oliver was simply a woman propelled by her desire for “protection” from a villainous husband who had failed to provide the protection he had promised to her in marriage, and in her case, the appeal was granted. Margaret Oliver’s plight therefore resonates with the cases of other planter class women for whom divorce was overwhelmingly about upholding traditional gender conventions in marriage, for both men and women. As slaveholding women from the highest echelons of southern society, their expectations of marriage and motherhood were tied to the protection and provision ideals promised to them in their coverture in exchange for their legal anonymity and sexual subordination.

The theme of protection surfaces in many of the legal petitions examined in this chapter. This was particularly evident in the case of elite women petitioning for divorce. There were many reasons why women wanted to leave unhappy marriages. However, in terms of early nineteenth-century law, the only grounds for divorce were consanguinity or having a shared ancestry or blood relation, insanity (which was difficult to prove), impotence at the time of marriage, and bigamy. The majority of the southern states also decreed “adultery, cruelty, and desertion as causes for divorce.”¹⁷ Even as the century progressed, the states varied tremendously on the grounds on which the dissolution of marriage was permitted, especially in their interpretation of what constituted “cruelty” in marriage.¹⁸ This is reflected in the wide-range of divorce petitions filed by women from state to state and in the reaction they received from the courts. It would seem that a woman’s chances of having a divorce petition granted hinged on a number of different factors including which state she filed her divorce petition, what race and social class she

¹⁷ Jane Turner Censer, “‘Smiling Through Her Tears’: Ante-Bellum Southern Women and Divorce,” *American Journal of Legal History* 25 (1981): 27.

¹⁸ In South Carolina there were no divorce laws until Reconstruction, which in many ways reflected the Conservative ethos of that particular state. See Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 168-9.

was, and lastly if she had demonstrated that she was an upstanding woman or ‘true woman’ in the eyes of the community.

Women often wanted to protect themselves from personal indignities, or false accusations that could potentially tarnish their good character. This again reflected the importance of nineteenth-century gender conventions, which were particularly marked in the petitions of women from the elite class. This was connected to their status as southern ladies and the added pressure to continually prove that they were upholding the tenets of true womanhood in a manner that was absent from the petitions of lower class, white men and women. In the divorce petitions filed by poorer white men, the overwhelming reason cited by men seeking a divorce from their wives was the accusation of sexual infidelity. Women were reported to have indulged in extra-marital sexual liaisons (often with black men) resulting in the birth of a ‘mulatto’ child. These cases had a clear class bias and only rarely surfaced for the elite classes.¹⁹

Norfleet Perry appealed to the court of Tennessee in 1819, saying that his wife, Rachael had “delivered of a mulatto child,” six months into their marriage.²⁰ In Haywood County, North Carolina, John Chambers a lower class white man requested an annulment of his marriage to Riney O’Neal. His divorce petition claimed that his wife “about two weeks after marriage...was charged with having delivered of a mulatto child,” which he declared he previously knew nothing about.²¹ Thomas Culpepper filed a similar divorce petition in December 1835, in light of his wife’s actions that had “polluted the marriage bed” by “engaging in carnal intercourse” with “black men.”²² It was at the court’s discretion to interpret cases such as Thomas Chamber and Thomas Culpepper’s and to

¹⁹ Censer, “Smiling Through Her Tears,” 24 - 47. Also see, Martha Elizabeth Hodes (ed.), *Sex, Love and Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

²⁰ Divorce Petition of Norfleet Perry to the Legislature of the State of Tennessee, RSPP, PAR No. 11481926.

²¹ Petition of John Chambers to General Assembly of North Carolina, Session Records, RSPP, PAR No. 11282504.

²² Petition of Thomas Culpepper to the House of Delegates of Virginia, Legislative Petitions, RSPP, PAR No. 11683501.

disentangle fact from fiction. However, what we do know by reading through the petitions was that there were far more accusations of sexual infidelity that resulted in the birth of mulatto children, filed by the lower class than middle-to-upper-class white men.

This strong race and class bias is of uppermost importance when evaluating the divorce petitions of slaveholding whites. As previously discussed, the protection of a woman's "virtue" was of considerable importance to planter class women (in marriage, widowhood or non-marriage) as it was connected to the fulfilment of gender roles, and dominant prescriptions of femininity dictated to them by the society in which they lived. Slaveholding families naturally had a larger proportion of property and therefore it should come as no surprise that the majority of the petitions regarding property came from the elite class.

Elite, slaveholding women had a greater investment to protect in appealing to the courts for help. By examining the various petitions, it soon becomes apparent that the courts rarely extended their protection to poorer white women, as they were not considered worthy of the support of the courts in the same way as wealthy white women were. In the antebellum era, a strong class and race bias perceived lower class white women and blacks as having a far lower threshold to behave as true women and conversely a far higher one when it came to dealing with personal offences. Elite women by contrast were considered far more "delicate" and "refined" in their conduct and nature, creatures that could easily be troubled or affected by verbal insults and personal indignities targeted at them.²³ Judge George Goldthwaite of the Alabama Supreme Court in 1855, speaking with reference to personal indignities, highlighted this point when he stated that:

²³Censer, "Smiling Through Her Tears," 35.

Between persons of education, refinement, and delicacy, the slightest blow in anger might be cruelty; while between persons of a different character and walk in life, blows might occasionally pass without marring to any great extent their conjugal relations or materially interfering with their happiness. We can lay down no certain rule, as to what violence will amount to cruelty, when it does not affect life, limb or health. Each case must depend on its own particular circumstances.²⁴

Judge Goldthwaite was referring to what Jane Turner Censer terms “relativism.”²⁵ Relativism was imperative to the way in which southern legislatures dealt with divorce petitions of southern women and with regard to other areas of disparity such as race.

In order to gain the sympathy of the courts, slaveholding women still had to demonstrate that they had fulfilled the tenets of true womanhood. They had to show that they had done everything in their power to make a marriage work, including turning a blind eye to minor indiscretions or annoyances from their husbands if they were to be granted a divorce and returned to the status of singleness. It was vital that women acted with ladylike decorum in order to gain the approval of the legislative body, which included showing they were faultless in almost every way.²⁶ By doing this, elite women were able to manipulate their position as Southern ladies by demonstrating what Jabour refers to as “a prudent awareness of the balance of power.”²⁷

Mary Terry from Goochland County, Virginia stressed in her petition to the court that her personal conduct throughout her fifteen-year marriage to her husband, William Terry, had been exemplary and that she had acted as “a dutiful and affectionate wife.”²⁸ Mary Terry clearly understood the importance of couching her request for divorce in the language of benevolence and duty, and was keen to prove that she was not to blame for her husband leaving her and their children to instead live in adultery with a ‘Negro’

²⁴ Ibid., 35.

²⁵ Ibid., 35.

²⁶ Ibid., 38. Censer highlights how important it was for plaintiffs to show that they were pinnacles of “domesticity,” industriousness” and “good management,” when filing for a divorce. A woman had to “prove” that she had been “wronged” but also to demonstrate that she had continued to act with “ladylike decorum.”

²⁷ Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 13.

²⁸ Divorce Petition of Mary Terry to General Assembly of Virginia, January 1850, Legislative Petitions, RSPP, PAR No. 11685006.

woman.²⁹ In the closing lines of Mary Terry's petition, she took pains to emphasise "the extraordinary conduct of her said husband" which had "not been brought about by any neglect of duty or affection on her part."³⁰ The wording of Mary Terry's petition was typical of most divorce petitions filed by female plaintiffs at the time. Women not only had to show that their husbands were at fault; but they also had to prove that *they* were the innocent victims if they were to regain their status as a *femme sole*.³¹ These cases demonstrate that divorce was a hazardous area for married women. If women were able to understand and manipulate the legal system to their advantage it could also offer a route to personal autonomy.

In Texas, Sarah Black told a similar story of marital discord and abuse. She sought a divorce and alimony from her husband, James Black in Brazoria County. She had caught him "in the act of having illicit sexual intercourse" with two of his slaves, a 'mulatto' woman named Susan and "a Negro woman named Ann or Annie" in 1855. When she confronted him, he threatened her with "a damned good whipping or cowhiding," presumably for her outspoken and unladylike outburst. He told her "he would give it [the whipping] to her unless she minded her own business." Sarah recalled the profane language used by her husband, reporting that he had called her "a god damned bitch."³² He also instructed the slaves on his plantation to disobey her orders, therefore further undermining her. She felt threatened, surrounded by recalcitrant slaves, who chanted at her, calling her a liar, which belittled her to such a degree, that she felt status was as low as a 'Negro' enslaved on the plantation, which reveals interplay of race, class and gender positions. The overseer told her that he had been "given orders not to punish any of the servants at her request," which left her in a lonely and isolated position. Sarah

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Censer, "Smiling Through Her Tears," 37.

³² Petition of Sarah H. Black to Judge of the First Judicial District in Texas, RSPP, PAR No. 21585501, Brazoria County Courthouse.

Black was unsuccessful in her petition to the courts and her case was dismissed. Although it is difficult to substantiate, it is possible that the court were unconvinced that Sarah had acted with sufficient ladylike decorum. Since she had remonstrated against her husband, and challenged his authority, the court may have decided that she had actually provoked the physical attack he made on her.³³

Consequently, the law only “offered limited use in seeking relief from overbearing husbands precisely because the law so favoured the authority of the husband over the wife” that reflected the patriarchal society of the nineteenth-century South.³⁴ Therefore, women often constructed their divorce petitions in such a way so as to gain the sympathy of the courts, and in doing so maximised their chances of them being passed, thus regaining their single status.³⁵ The evidence suggests that this was the case as late as 1855, even though in reality changes were occurring, but these were patchy and depended on which state women lived. For example, women who filed for divorce in Alabama, North Carolina, Tennessee, or Louisiana on the grounds of cruelty had a increased chance of success than in other states. This also reflected the courts’ desire to protect innocent victims against excessive cruelty or personal abuse in a society that vested so much power into the hands of men. The legislative body therefore aimed to protect “wronged wives” rather more than to provide women with an enhanced level of personal autonomy.³⁶ As a result, in the case of women who voluntarily sought a divorce, it was imperative that they

³³ Petition of Sarah H. Black to the Judge of the First Judicial District in Texas, RSPP, PAR No. 21585501, Brazoria County Courthouse. Even in a Western frontier state like Texas that was fairly liberal in its treatment of women, compared to elsewhere in the South, a definite gender bias continued to exist in divorce cases. In the Texas Divorce Law passed in 1841, men had a clear advantage if they sued for divorce. The statute of 1841 allowed a husband to divorce his wife if she “shall have voluntarily left his bed and board, for the space of three years with intention of abandonment” or, if she had “been taken in adultery.” Whilst the abandonment provision was fairly standard for both sexes, the law gave far greater moral latitude to men when it came to adultery, as women had to prove that her husband had not only been adulterous, but that he had actually “lived in adultery with another woman” which was far harder to prove. No amendments were made to the Texas Divorce Law until 1873, and even then it simply added on a six-month county residency requirement. See Francelle Blum, “When Marriages Fail,” 23-26.

³⁴ Jane Turner Censer quoted in Norma Basch, “The Emerging Legal History,” 107.

³⁵ Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 60-61.

³⁶ Censer, “Smiling Through Her Tears,” 27.

could prove (without any shadow of doubt) that they had lived an upstanding, good, and moral life as a southern wife.

As underlined by Basch, women who sought divorce had generally exhausted any other options available to them. It was a final attempt to have their voice heard, and to have their concerns validated in the court of law. If their petition was granted it restored their status as a *femme sole* and it resulted in the reinstatement of certain rights and qualifications. In doing so, it allowed single women to provide for themselves because the court had intervened to protect them. Male relatives of family friends often supported women's pleas for divorce. Catherine Smith was an unhappily married woman from Tennessee, who told a similar story of abuse. In her divorce petition, filed in October 1821, she told of her husband's violence, "lewdness, drunkenness and debauchery" that included his "illegal intimacies with the slaves" who "were subject to his contoll [sic]."³⁷ In a supporting petition, Alfred Edney noted, that Smith treated his wife "in an inhuman and intolerable manner," fuelled by his intemperance and "lewd" sexual conduct with slave women. A friend, Alfred Edney further supported her claim by adding that, "he did not think she would be safe in continuing to live with him," which supported her claim the backing of male authority, and which resulted in her being granted a divorce.³⁸

The results of the petitions are not always clear. Some appeals were partially granted, others were referred on, and no final results are recorded. Jane Brown, from Guilford County, North Carolina suffered a catalogue of physical and mental abuse over the course of her twenty-nine year marriage to Hayley Brown. Her husband had "beaten her with a stick" and insulted her honour by sleeping with a white woman, who he later eloped with. Brown was "a man of large estate" consisting of "valuable lands, stock, horses, mules, cash, notes, bonds, and twelve or thirteen slaves," that propelled his wife

³⁷ Divorce Petition of Catherine Smith to General Assembly of Tennessee, Legislative Petitions, RSPP, PAR No. 11482106.

³⁸ Ibid.

into an appeal to the court. Jane, fearful that her husband might flee the state and sell their property, which included their slaves, appealed to the court for a divorce and alimony. Her request was partially granted which led to a degree of financial security and with it a route to enhanced personal autonomy.³⁹

Other women were significantly less fortunate in claiming to the courts for protection or support, even though their stories were marked by extreme violence and cruelty. Martha Smith Green from Williamson County, Tennessee, had her divorce petition rejected in 1829 in spite of what she describes as such “violent” physical abuse that was so bad that she “carried the marks ... on her body for twenty weeks.” Desperate to seek protection from her husband’s malicious conduct and fearing for her life, Martha attempted to escape, sneaking out of their plantation home, cloaked in the cover of darkness, as she fled to her father’s house, in search of safety.

Martha did not escape from the plantation home unnoticed. Her husband “pursued” her with “Negroes and dogs,” until he caught her and dragged her back to the plantation home in a “violent” manner.⁴⁰ That night’s events acted as a catalyst that sparked a spell of ill health for Martha, that became so serious that she almost died. Nevertheless, it was only under considerable duress, that Thomas Green (her husband) finally relented and had her removed to her father’s house for recuperation and medical care, so keen was he to exhibit his patriarchal authority over her in a clear display of gender roles.

This demonstrates how slaveholding women’s position in the southern hierarchy – regardless of their privilege and class – was ultimately tied to their subordinate status to male authority. The intervention of Martha’s father and the pressure that he exerted on

³⁹ Petition of Jane Brown to Court of Equity for the County of Guilford, County Court Divorce Records, RSPP, PAR No. 21286026.

⁴⁰ Divorce Petition of Martha Smith Green to the General Assembly of Tennessee, Legislative Petition, RSPP, PAR No. 11482911.

Green as a rival figure of male authority resulted in Martha being granted temporary relief from a violent and abusive marriage. However, Martha's divorce petition to the court was quickly rejected. Therefore, in Martha's case her personal autonomy remained checked by the power and authority of the southern judiciary. There are a number of possible reasons why her petition was rejected. As a wealthy planter her husband may have exercised a considerable amount of influence in the county, which afforded him preferential treatment in court.⁴¹ Also, in spite of Mary's emphasis on her own ladylike and dutiful conduct, she did admit that she had "remonstrated" against him, simultaneously claiming that she had been "dutiful" and "affectionate" in her conduct. Therefore her behaviour may have negated any claims that she was the innocent party. On a closer reading of the case it reads that, Thomas Green had "knocked her back" in response to her "remonstrations" to his accusations that she was too familiar with other gentleman. Therefore, the case of Martha Green illustrates an important point. Elite women seeking a divorce would fare better if they demonstrated an on-going adherence to traditional gender conventions within marriage. It helped the court decide if she was indeed worthy of its protection, which ultimately led to a favourable divorce settlement or outcome.⁴²

In a similar case, Mary Hookins from Anderson County, Tennessee, had her divorce petition rejected in 1846. In her petition she described the gradual deterioration of her husband's conduct towards her, which began as verbal abuse, but quickly developed into violence, adultery and desertion. As in the case of Martha Green, Hookins admitted that she had "remonstrated" against her husband's conduct. In reference to his adultery, she

⁴¹ Francelle Blum's study of Texas describes a rising rate of marital dissolution across the United States by the late nineteenth century. The results from the Carroll-Wright Report show that in the 1870s alone, the general divorce rate increased by almost 80%, but in Texas it rose by a staggering, 352%. Francelle Blum, "When Marriages Fail," 5-6. Texas did not follow English Common Law (whereas the remainder of the South, bar Louisiana, did). Yet, culturally it was still very southern, even though it was a western frontier based on Spanish law. Its frontier attitudes made it distinctive and generous in its outlook towards women's liberties. Blum, "When Marriages Fail."

⁴² Divorce Petition of Martha Smith Green to the General Assembly of Tennessee, Legislative Petition, RSPP, PAR No. 11482911.

noted, “when your petitioner greatly remonstrated against his conduct, so far from apologising for his acts, he picked up a poker and flourished it over her head, knocked down her cupboard, broke down her table, furniture and cups and saucers into a thousand pieces.” When he whipped her for “no good reason” she again objected, to which he remarked, “He would whip her every day of her life if he wanted to.”⁴³

These cases highlight the manner in which the court sympathised with middle and upper-class women who conformed to traditional models of southern womanhood. If women proved that they were pure, submissive, needy and dependent, they were rewarded with the court’s protection. Any sign that a woman protested against her husband, or challenged his authority in any small way, could be interpreted as unladylike or subversive behaviour. This in turn warranted physical chastisement from her husband, from which she deserved no protection from the courts, much less a divorce that threatened the patriarchal order.⁴⁴

However, the concept of cruelty was broad and variable in terms of how it was interpreted by the courts. It varied from state to state supporting the claim that the broadening of divorce law in the South was often uneven and patchy. For example, in antebellum Georgia, common law was followed to the letter. The code read, “in this state the husband is the head of the family, and the wife is subject to him,” which made it much harder for women to obtain a divorce if they resided there.⁴⁵ This is reflected in the court petitions that reveal the ways in which Georgian women were subject to more extreme

⁴³ Divorce Petition of Mary Hookins to General Assembly of Tennessee, Legislative Petition. RSPP, PAR No. 114844502.

⁴⁴ Divorce Petition of Mary Hookins to General Assembly of Tennessee, Legislative Petitions, RSPP, PAR No. 11484502. Hookins had her petition rejected in 1846. She described the gradual deterioration of her husband’s conduct that began as verbal abuse, but then degenerated into extreme physical violence, adultery and desertion.

⁴⁵ Suzanne Lebsock, “Radical Reconstruction and the Property Rights of Southern Women,” *The Journal of Southern History* 43:2 (1977): 201.

legal demands than women in many of their sister states. The process of legal reform was slow and measured in Georgia. It was not until Reconstruction that changes occurred.⁴⁶

By contrast, in Alabama, the statute of 1820 requiring, “cruelty to endanger life” was modified by 1832, “to cruel and barbarous and inhuman treatment.”⁴⁷ In Texas, an additional clause concerning cruelty was passed in 1841 which permitted divorce on grounds of “excesses, cruel treatment, or outrages towards the other [person]” and if “such ill treatment is of such a nature, as to lend their being together insupportable.” It helped to dilute traditional interpretations of what previously constituted as cruelty.⁴⁸ In Florida, again, it was much easier to obtain a divorce on grounds of cruelty. Eliza Patterson had her petition passed granting her a divorce from her husband, Alexander Patterson in Monroe County, Florida in December 1836 because of his “cruel and inhuman treatment” and “criminal connection” with a slave girl.⁴⁹ Clearly, the state in which a petitioner resided played an important part in determining if her divorce petition was passed.

Carl Degler argues that the new emphasis on cruelty (and the broadening of the grounds for divorce) was a reflection of a growth in female autonomy. Degler posits that women were demanding their rights for protection under the doctrine of separate spheres.⁵⁰ In other words, women manipulated the conservative ethos of the South (and of the courts) and used their dependent status to their advantage, claiming that they had a right to do so because of their husbands’ failure to protect them. Therefore, from conservative soil sprang more radical social change for single women. For slaveholding women, who were considered to be the personification of femininity, their right to male protection was even more validated than the appeals of black women or lower class

⁴⁶ In Georgia, cruelty was not defined until 1867. Censer, “Smiling Through Her Tears,” 34.

⁴⁷ Censer, “Smiling Through Her Tears,” 27.

⁴⁸ Francelle Blum, “When Marriages Fail,” 25.

⁴⁹ Petition of Eliza Patterson to Legislative Counsel of Florida, RSPP, PAR No. 10583901.

⁵⁰ Degler, *At Odds*, 168-9.

whites. The evidence in the court petitions reflects this fact. Slaveholding women often had greater success in their appeals to the court, which mirrored their elevated social status. This ties to the overall thesis statement that singleness was a route to greater autonomy for planter class women.

Following the Civil War, men likewise started to cite wives, “failure to live up to the idea of the submissive subordinate” as reasons for divorce, which reflects the heightened social shifts in the construction of femininity in the Civil War and post-war period.⁵¹ As women’s lives were re-shaped in wartime, women began to foster alternative ideas on marriage, which is perhaps reflected in their reticence to conform to gender roles if they were married to men who clearly were unwilling to live up to theirs. Victoria Bynum suggests that divorce favoured men in the case of North Carolina, which again highlights the patchy, uneven transformations in divorce law.⁵² In the post-war period, men and women became less constrained by their separate spheres, and both parties were more willing to air their grievances in the event of an unhappy marriage.

This is also indicative of the social shifts in men and women’s roles in the Reconstruction era. By the late 1860s, men complained of cruelty from their wives as grounds for divorce, which included wives who spoke to them harshly (or in an unfeminine manner), or who lost their temper, throwing objects at them. Degler estimates that between 1901-1906 there were almost 13,680 divorce petitions filed on the grounds of cruelty, which suggests that women were actively rejecting the prescriptions of femininity that had dominated their lives in the early nineteenth century. By rejecting

⁵¹ Ibid., 169. According to Degler over 80% of men filed for divorce on these grounds alone between 1872-5. About one third of husbands claimed adultery by their wives, 44.8% cited desertion, and a 4.7% cruelty.”

⁵² Victoria Bynum, “Reshaping the Bonds of Womanhood: Divorce in Reconstruction North Carolina,” in Catherine Clinton ed. *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 320-335.

these notions of passive womanhood, and voluntarily seeking a divorce, these women were making a statement that broke free from the constraints of the past.⁵³

In the late antebellum period, women began to file for a divorce on a raft of “unreasonable behaviour” such as drunkenness, cruelty and neglect to provide that reflected the broadening of divorce laws from state to state.⁵⁴ After the Civil War, profound social changes, such as the emancipation of the slaves, had a serious impact on the lives of slaveholding women and their place in southern society. Whilst some elite, slaveholding women tried to prop-up a failed southern hierarchy, by returning to their pre-war roles, that had temporarily shifted in line with the vagaries so war, others started to be swayed by ideals of companionate marriage.

Reconstruction may well have been an era marked by a return to old values in the South in order to re-assert control over freed slaves and white women.⁵⁵ Yet even in the context of heightened conservatism, southern women’s roles still continued to change, though the process remained uneven from state to state. For example, in Arkansas, Mississippi and Florida more lenient terms were introduced that dealt with cruelty. In Arkansas and Florida a woman could be granted a divorce if her husband had abandoned her as little as a year, compared to five in Virginia.⁵⁶ In Mississippi, adultery and desertion were also elected to be worthy of an “absolute” divorce but “cruelty” was still a

⁵³ Ibid. For specific examples of male plaintiffs citing cruelty as a reason for divorce, refer to Degler, Chapter 5. Between 1872-76, 800 husbands’ petitions named cruelty by their wives as a reason for divorce.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Historians who have emphasised the South’s return to pre-Civil War values include: Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), George Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana: Illinois, 1989) and LeeAnn Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia 1860-1890* (Athens: Georgia, 1995).

⁵⁶ Virginia was one of the harshest states and stipulated a minimum length of five years in order for a divorce to be awarded on the grounds of desertion. Alabama raised its time requirement from two to three years, whereas Arkansas and Florida reduced theirs to one year. For more information see Censer, “Smiling Through Her Tears,” 27-28.

bed and board offence till later in the nineteenth century.⁵⁷ Likewise, if a woman lived in Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana or Mississippi, “drunkenness” was another validated cause for divorce.

In spite of the uneven reforms in divorce, the trend was clear, that it was generally becoming easier for a woman to obtain a divorce that freed her from an unhappy marriage. According to Degler two thirds of divorces were granted to women in 1860, which indicates that, the post-war led to a burgeoning in the rights of women, and an avenue to enhanced personal autonomy.⁵⁸ From 1872–1876, “some 63 percent of all divorces granted to women were for grounds that implied inadequate familial behaviour by husbands. The general grounds were cruelty, desertion, drunkenness and neglect to provide.”⁵⁹ For example, Winney Jeter complained in a divorce petition to the chancery courts of Alabama in 1844 that, “Her husband failed to protect her,” and Virginian, Sally Ballinger accused her husband of “forgetting his duties” as he was so consumed with drinking and infidelity.⁶⁰

In some states, being convicted of a felony also represented adequate grounds for a divorce. Knowing the legal requirements of divorce was therefore important when women filed for a divorce as it directly affected their chances of it being granted. Different clauses existed that gave justices powers to grant divorces for “any other just cause” and therefore, such clauses, were very much open to interpretation, which meant that women wanting a dissolution of marriage often walked on unsteady ground. This was particularly true in relation to the cruelty and indignity clauses.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Donna Elizabeth Sedevia, “The Prospect of Happiness: Women, Divorce and Property in the Mississippi Territory, 1798-1817,” *Journal of Mississippi History* LV11: 3 (1995): 201.

⁵⁸ Degler, *At Odds*, 168.

⁵⁹ Degler, *At Odds*, 168.

⁶⁰ Divorce Petition of Winney Jeter to Middle Chancery Division of the State of Alabama, RSPP, PAR No.20184524; Divorce Petition of Sally Ballinger to the Honorable Senate and of the House of Delegates of Virginia, RSPP, PAR No.1168304; Divorce Petition of Catharine Smith to the General Assembly of Tennessee, RSPP, PAR No. 11482106.

⁶¹ Censer, “Smiling Through Her Tears,” 38.

By the end of the antebellum period, North Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Texas, all granted divorces on grounds of cruelty without physical violence, which previously had not been a key constituent for divorce. As these cases demonstrate, the liberalisation of divorce laws was a step forward for women living in intolerable circumstances. It offered them a measure of relief if they were able to prove that their cases concurred with very specific guidelines. As increasing numbers of southern women filed for a divorce, fresh interpretations on the common law came about. Whilst women still operated within certain legal limitations, their scope was slowly widening, and women seized the opportunity to have their voices heard, which granted them additional rights and freedom within the law and in relation to property.

The evidence from this study therefore contributes to this broadening picture of divorce in the nineteenth-century South. It demonstrates the way in which planter class women were able to manipulate their status as ladies as an avenue to achieving a divorce.⁶² Two key themes emerge from the divorce petitions – the need for protection and for provision, especially when women had children to support and to provide for. As Degler argues, women were less concerned about male infidelity and were often willing to overlook these shortcomings, particularly if their husband promised to change his ways.

This can be seen in the case of Gatsey Stevenson from Lenoir County in North Carolina. Gatsey had returned to her “wayward,” “drunken,” and “adulterous” husband following a twelve to eighteen months separation, during which time she took her four children, and lived at her father’s house.⁶³ However, she was in her own words “doomed

⁶² This argument also links to Kirsten Wood’s analysis of slaveholding widows in the American Southeast and their use of ladyhood to exert authority in managing their plantations. See Kirsten Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁶³ Petition of Gatsey Stevenson to General Assembly of North Carolina, Session Records, RSPP, PAR No. 11283301.

to disappointment” because when she was eventually persuaded to return, she discovered that her husband had disappointed her again. He had “wasted” their property that included her “filial portion” which she brought to him in marriage. This consisted of “a valuable stock, and a plantation at the time of the value of \$1000 or \$2000.”⁶⁴ It was at this point, when the issue of family provision and the protection of property came into sharp focus, that Gatsy was far less forgiving, and forged ahead with her petition to air her grievances in the more public setting of a court and to voluntarily seek a return to a single status as the only certain way to care and protect herself and children.

Her case resonates with slaveholding women in similar predicaments, but again, it also demonstrates the reluctance of women to leave the marital union, unless they felt there were forced to because of the urgency of their personal circumstances – which is different to some of the women in the previous chapters who chose not to marry at all. Many of the women who decided to divorce their husbands in the early antebellum period, did so because they had exhausted other options. In other words, they were in a position so precarious that they were forced to seek a divorce.

In the post-war period divorce became more accessible and hence widespread, which led to an opportunity for increased female autonomy in the public sphere. This highlights the shift in the nature of marriage but also, just as crucially, a change in men’s and women’s perceptions of what constituted acceptable gender roles. In the post-war period, the South may well have attempted to return to the conservatism of its past, in terms of the way that some men and women (particularly from the old elites) tried to re-assert gender roles. The courts reflected this in some respects, such as in their preferential treatment to elite women who had fulfilled the ideal of true womanhood but who had been let down by their husbands. The era of Reconstruction was also marked by the slow

⁶⁴ Ibid.

but steady liberalisation of divorce laws, which may well have sprung from conservative roots but which nonetheless, enabled women an easier route to divorce and therefore a voluntary return to their femme sole status.

Femme Sole versus Femme Covert Status

According to the Cult of True Womanhood, marriage and motherhood were essential markers of the nineteenth-century feminine ideal.⁶⁵ Through it, women gained social respectability and, in theory, provision, purpose and protection. Without it, women were seen as social outcasts, or “redundant” females who lived on the margins of society, without a home, husband, nor social standing to provide for them. At least, this was the popular myth circulated in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century as highlighted in the *Construction of Femininity*. In reality single women’s lives were often rich and textured. A single woman, or femme sole had a distinct legal identity and certain rights enshrined in law that married women did not.

A “single woman’s legal status was for the most part, indistinguishable from the legal status of many men. A single woman could contract, own, dispose, write wills, engage in most forms of business, testify, demand the obedience and the guardianship of her children.”⁶⁶ This put her in a unique, and potentially powerful position, that was quite contrary to the “redundant” myth that circulated. However, when a woman married, she became “a femme covert, and a husband possessed a dependent wife.”⁶⁷ Therefore, marriage, rather than guaranteeing protection and provision for women, actually placed it into the safekeeping of a husband’s hands, and trusted in him to act in a wife’s best interest. As Hendrik Hartog notes, “By marriage, a host of property rights, obligations,”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Barbara Welter, “‘Cult of True Womanhood’: 1820-1860” *American Quarterly* 18: 2 (1966): 151-174.

⁶⁶ Hendrik Hartog, *Man and Wife in America: A History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press, 2000), 118.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

losses, gains, immunities, exemptions, remedies, and duties had come into one's life," and a wife must rely upon her good judgement in accepting a proposal of marriage, and hope that it had been the right one.⁶⁹

Marriage, in theory, was a contract between a man and a woman, in which a woman forfeited her legal identity and her rights in exchange for the cover and protection of her husband. In reality, "Marriage negated a woman's powers to make contracts, or own and dispose of property in her own right; to write wills, or to engage in any form of business, or to testify and demand the obedience and guardianship of her children."⁷⁰ Marriage, then, equated to a loss of power for women, whereas singleness did not. The law also gave men control over family finances, full custody of the children and even the right and responsibility of governing wives behaviour "by physical force if necessary," which complicated petitions filed by wives who pleaded for divorce on grounds of cruelty as it was interpreted so broadly by judges from state to state, as previously discussed.⁷¹

Clearly, there was a real dichotomy when it came to marriage because women exchanged legal autonomy for social respect. At the close of the eighteenth century women were encouraged to marry primarily for fiscal reasons centred on "concrete, calculable assets – property, earning capacity and social standing," but these reasons slowly started to give way, and by the nineteenth century a new wave of consensus started to build that saw marriage as a union that could, and increasingly should, be for love.⁷² By the early nineteenth century, a new ideal of "companionate marriage" began to move to centre stage, and along with it came a meteoric rise in men and women's expectations of marriage.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 115-117.

⁷¹ Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 60 & Jane H. Pease & William H. Pease, *Ladies, Women and Wenches: Choice and Constraint in Antebellum Charleston and Boston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 91.

⁷² Lebsack, *Free Women*, 16-17.

Historian Suzanne Leacock argues that the rise in companionate marriage enhanced women's status in domestic life, by providing women with "greater power, greater autonomy, and a strong even equal voice in family affairs," a thought echoed by historians, such as Carl Degler.⁷³ Yet, as with other ideals prevalent at the time, the companionate ideal was not always widespread and it was frequently challenged by social, political, economic and legal attitudes that remained ingrained, even when changes were afoot.⁷⁴ However, as marriages started to become more companionate, women increasingly wanted their voices to be heard in terms of how they were treated by their husbands, in how they raised their children, where they lived and how their husbands should behave, which included providing care and protection for them.⁷⁵

Social historians have developed their own interpretation of divorce, informed by the concept of companionate marriage. Their argument maintains that higher expectations in marriage led to disappointments, if and when marriages failed, and a greater willingness to dissolve what was perceived as a flawed marriage.⁷⁶ Companionate marriage made women "start to complain of men's adultery and men of women's desertion," which is strongly reflected in the divorce petitions examined in this chapter.⁷⁷ In other words, the rise in the expectations of marriage led women to become more confrontational – or at least more vocal in terms of their expectations and desires of what they hoped for from the marital union. Men often saw opinionated women, who were willing to exert themselves as exhibiting subversive behaviour, that fell outside of the

⁷³ Degler, *At Odds*, 168-9. Degler links the rising divorce rate to the ideal of companionate marriage. He also views the rise in then divorce rates as a sign of women's growing desire for autonomy. This contrasts to Norma Basch, who said that divorce was "the gambit of the desperate" and the pursuit of protection for women.

⁷⁴ Peter Bardaglio noted that the "profound social changes" in the South "slowly" filtered through to the legal system and became "mirrored" in the law. See Peter Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Southern Household: Families, Sex and the Law in the Nineteenth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), Introduction.

⁷⁵ Degler, *At Odds*, 168-9.

⁷⁶ Norma Basch, "The Emerging Legal History," 106.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

Cult of True Womanhood, thus causing friction in marriages that were not built on the foundations of love.

The liberalisation of divorce laws started to reflect the increasing demand for companionate marriage and the growing belief that women deserved to be happy in their marriages. This led to an increasing number of women starting to file for divorce if their needs in marriage were not fulfilled. They were also increasingly granted.⁷⁸ In addition to divorce, women also required alimony and the protection of their property. In 1861, Hannah Crawford filed a petition for a divorce from her husband Jesse Crawford. Despite a marriage spanning over fifty years, Hannah claimed that she had lived unhappily for the last twenty years because of her husband's "personal abuse and violent manner" and sought a fair and equal division" of their "handsome estate" land and slaves. In the Crawford case, they made "a division and partition of property without the intervention of the court."⁷⁹ Others were less accommodating. In Talladega County Alabama in 1861, Margaret Merritt requested the courts to remove her estranged husband as trustee of her slave property or from "intermeddling" with her property after she had filed for a divorce and alimony.⁸⁰ Clearly, still feeling constrained by her husband's interference in her financial affairs, she was willing to take her complaint to a higher body. Finally, in 1868, a full seven years after her request was lodged, her plea was eventually granted.

Other women complained about their husbands initial motivations to marry. Lucy Norman from Henry County, Virginia filed for a divorce on December 20th 1848. After a brief spell of marital happiness, the Norman marriage had quickly unravelled because of his "dissipated habits," violence" and "adultery" that culminated in his desertion of her

⁷⁸ In the petitions studied for this chapter, it is more difficult to ascertain what percentage of them resulted in the cases being granted to women. Some of the petitions include a recorded result, but many do not. Further investigation, or a more detailed study would be beneficial in the future in order to ascertain more definite patterns. For a more general figure see Degler, *At Odds*, 168-169.

⁷⁹ Petition of Hannah Crawford to District Court of Texas, Records of the District Court, RSPP, PAR No. 21586104.

⁸⁰ Petition of Margaret Merritt to Northern Chancery Division, RSPP, PAR No. 20186111.

for another woman. Yet, Lucy Norman had more to protect than simply her good name. She also stressed how much her husband had gained as a result of their marriage, in terms of his ownership of “a large estate with lands and negroes,” that she provided in 1844.⁸¹ Women petitioning for divorce, therefore, showed considerable autonomy in seeking compensation for property lost to dishonest or villainous husbands or from being forced to make settlements against their will.

Similar tales of men tricking women into marriage, for monetary gain are legion. Polly Reid from North Carolina claimed her husband married her for her property in 1832.⁸² Similarly, Virginian Mary Lawson sought a divorce from her husband, Fabius Lawson in January 1840.⁸³ In her statement to the court, Mary claimed that Fabius had deprived her of all her money and never “conferred upon me a cent.”⁸⁴ She also made it plain that he had married her for her property and “deprived me of a portion of that which was my own property and I am now left without adequate means of support.”⁸⁵ Wealthy women were still at risk, because in spite of the rise in companionate marriages, some men still harboured more selfish motivations for marriage, other than for love, such as gaining property. Fathers could protect their daughters’ welfare by protecting their property in the form of a separate estate.

Ruth Balderee lived in South Carolina, one of the most recalcitrant states in the South. Historians have noted that it was “virtually impossible” to obtain a divorce in South Carolina as it was a staunchly conservative, slaveholding state that placed a high value on marriage, and therefore those in power did everything they could to protect it,

⁸¹ Petition of Lucy Norman to General Assembly of Virginia, Legislative Petitions, RSPP, PAR No. 11684814.

⁸² Divorce Petition of Mary Reid to General Assembly of North Carolina, Session Records, RSPP, PAR No 11283204.

⁸³ Petition of Mary Lawson to House of Delegates of Virginia, Legislative Petitions, RSPP PAR No. 11684005.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid. Before Mary married she had a prenuptial agreement drawn up that ring fenced ten of her slaves in a lifetime estate, free from her husband’s “liabilities.”

and were extremely reluctant to dissolve it under any circumstances.⁸⁶ The highest concentration of wealthy, planter class families came from the southern seaboard states. They were the arbiters of power and wealth in the region and as such were well represented in politics and the legislative system. South Carolina was particularly strict regarding its divorce laws and it was not until 1868 that it “granted a divorce with the right to remarry.” However, it did accommodate wives some relief from “intolerable” marriages. In an 1822 statute, women were provided with a bed and board divorce in cases of “intolerable ill temper” or adulterous behaviour from either of the parties, which was a huge step forward. There were two types of divorce, a bed and board divorce or “a mensa a thoro” which to all intents and purposes was a legal separation but within a continuing marriage. The second form of divorce was a complete or total divorce. It is important to remember, as Norma Basch points out, that for “all of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century” divorce only “provided relief for the wronged or innocent spouse” and was only granted on very specific grounds. Therefore, when filing a divorce petition it was vital that women could identify and validate acceptable reasons for having their appeal granted.⁸⁷ However, as Ruth Balderee discovered, there were other ways that a woman could hold on to family property. One of these was signing a prenuptial agreement, or ring-fencing property in what was commonly referred to as a separate estate. This is exactly what Ruth did. Prior to her marriage in 1819, Ruth and her fiancé, Sterling Balderee signed a contract granting her control of a separate estate.

The question of what motivated Ruth Balderee to take such an action seems self evident, for she was in possession of a large number of properties and slaves, and therefore had a vested interest in protecting them. Sterling Balderee, her fiancé, was “financially destitute,” and had little, if any, property of his own, yet he was still willing

⁸⁶ For more information, see Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 64.

⁸⁷ Basch, “Emerging Legal History,” 106.

to allow his wife-to-be to retain her land and slaves. He most probably anticipated that by doing so was actually protecting the property from falling into the hands of debtors who would have seized it, had it been passed into his hands. Like many men who allowed their wives, or future wives to set up a separate estate, there was almost always an ulterior motive, which was normally to prevent property falling into the hands of creditors, which it would almost certainly have done in Sterling Balderee's case.⁸⁸ In the economic crisis of the 1830s, men became increasingly concerned about losing their own property, and therefore set up separate estates, called equitable trusts, for women, in the hope of saving their own property, without any foresight into the long-term ramifications of their spurious actions.⁸⁹

As it so happened, it was also a prudent decision on Ruth Balderee's behalf, as it sheltered her from financial destitution in the future, when her marriage started to unravel. When Sterling's behaviour became "vulgar" and he started to beat and whip his wife, she had some economic recourse, and she left the family home and filed for a divorce. Ruth was an autonomous woman, who was propelled by her husband's extreme behaviour, to fall back on his promise of a separate estate. Little did Sterling anticipate the outcome of his earlier agreement, or the repercussions that his earlier decision was to have, when his wife had her request to have "the return of her property, which includes twenty-four slaves, twelve of whom are now in Sterling's possession and claimed by him as his own," partially granted.⁹⁰

The separate estate then had several different functions. In the eyes of the law it safeguarded men and women from economic ruin. In the 1830s, women even began to trade their dower rights to secure separate estates for themselves, a point which will be

⁸⁸ Petition of Ruth Balderee to Chancery Court of Alabama, Records of Circuit Court, RSPP, PAR No. 20184512.

⁸⁹ Lebsack, *Free Women*, 200-203.

⁹⁰ Petition of Ruth Balderee to Chancery Court of Alabama, Records of Circuit Court, RSPP, PAR No. 20184512.

explained more fully later on. Separate estates were also a means of keeping wealth, or property in the family and effectively ring-fencing it from unscrupulous husbands. The creation of separate estates benefited wealthy families as it “increased the odds that legacies would pass intact from one generation to the next,” rather than being lost or squandered at the hands of “unreliable men.”⁹¹ The passing of the Married Women’s Property Acts, the most important of which was in 1848, and the gradual erosion of coverture meant single women benefited from property protection, whether they were never married or, if they had become single again at some stage in their life course.⁹² The separate estate could also be useful to widows, particularly if they were considering re-marriage, for they were loathed to forfeit the terms of their inheritance or jeopardise any property held in trust for their children. Therefore the separate estate offered them some protection. The area of property provision and protection was of vital importance to all women, not only to those who married. After all, all women were single for part of their lives (it was the natural trajectory that formed part of their lives as young women) and many of those women who married also became single again because of death, desertion or divorce. “Most women probably moved through the full spectrum from spinster to wife to widow throughout their life course,” and at some stage, the issue of property would be an issue to each and every one of them.⁹³

There were many different forms of property protection. In the post-war period the number of never-married women who had a separate estate rose dramatically. “In the past spinster daughters could expect for no more than a provision of a home with an inheriting

⁹¹ Lebock, *Free Women*, 77-78.

⁹² The Married Women’s Property Act passed in Mississippi in 1839 granted married women the right to own (but not control) property in their own name. It was followed in Texas in 1841, Florida in 1845, Alabama in 1846, and New York State in 1848.

⁹³ Jane H. Pease & William H. Pease, *Ladies, Women & Wenches: Choice & Constraint in Antebellum Charleston and Boston* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 3.

sibling in a will.”⁹⁴ By 1850, a new pattern was emerging whereby never-married daughters began to benefit from family inheritance as past qualifications were removed concerning a woman’s marital status and whether or not she would be left anything in a father or sibling’s will. Jane Turner Censer argues that “The typical child in old elite Upper South families could expect a share of the patrimony relatively similar to that of a sibling,” which was a huge step forward for unmarried women.⁹⁵ It also demonstrated a growing acceptance in the family and in society in general, towards the single woman. She was not simply provided for, but she was counted as an individual with her own legal identity and rights, that were not swept aside by social condemnation or disapproval.

Margaret and Mildred Cameron, the two unmarried daughters of the banker and planter Duncan Cameron of Orange County in North Carolina provide a good illustration of this point. Duncan Cameron died in 1856, and in his will he ensured appropriate provision for all of his children. His son, Paul Cameron, received the largest legacies and he took “Fairtosh plantation in Orange County, North Carolina and the lands and the slaves in Greene County, Alabama.”⁹⁶ The rest of his slaves were divided between his four children, Paul, Margaret and Mildred (who were both single) and Thomas who was mentally retarded and received his share in trust. The two girls jointly inherited Cameron’s house near Raleigh and its hundreds of acres of land, and Mildred also received the Brick House Plantation in her own right. Cameron knew that his eldest daughter (and helpmeet for Mildred) was likely to marry her long-term suitor, George Mordecai, and therefore he ensured that the provision for Mildred was especially generous. This example clearly shows that unmarried women were in no way

⁹⁴ Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White, Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 111.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

disadvantaged if they chose to remain single for life in the nineteenth-century South, and also within the southern family by mid-century.⁹⁷

The Cameron family were no anomaly – in the post-war South there was a growing tendency to bequeath property and land to unmarried daughters. Mildred Marshall inherited land in 1868 even though at the time of her mother's death she was forty-four and unlikely to ever marry. The Holladay sisters from Spotsylvania County in Virginia were also beneficiaries of their late father's will. They were granted permission to remain living in the family home and they each received \$4,000 whilst their "five surviving brothers received land."⁹⁸ Clearly, women's relationship to property and the law was "influenced by changing social values as well as the increasing importance of equity jurisprudence and the passage of new statutes that encroached on the common law tradition."⁹⁹ This helped alter perceptions of single women, as there was a growing acceptance of women on their own and how they fitted into society. The separate estate could also be useful to widows, particularly if they were considering re-marriage, as a way of protecting both their own and children's property from falling outside of their power or control.

Single women also received or inherited property from their brothers. This was particularly apparent in the Civil War period, when large numbers of men lost their lives fighting for the Confederacy. Often, fathers had bequeathed land and property to their sons, who later died and passed on their property to their sisters. Isaac Avery left his lands to his two unmarried sisters Laura and Adelaide Avery, which highlighted a growing

⁹⁷ Censer, *The Reconstruction of White, Southern Womanhood*, 112 & The Cameron Family Papers 1757-1978, Southern Historical Collection (hereafter cited SHC).

⁹⁸ Ibid., 113 & The Holladay Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society (hereafter cited VHS), Richmond, Virginia. Frances Holladay to Elizabeth Travis Lewis, August 1853, Correspondence of Frances Ann Holladay, The Holladay Family Papers, VHS. Frances writes about the different roles that each sister took on within the family compact. "Eliza, Virgin and myself, take it a week each about to keep house, Mother always gives out dinner if she is well enough, and gives general directions. Huldah attends to the fowls, and raises a great many... We all think Virgin very much like Ann was, in appearance, and has ways like her. In sickness, she is invaluable as a nurse."

⁹⁹ Pease & Pease, *Ladies, Women & Wenches*, 90-114.

trend of female property ownership that went hand in hand with the close relationships shared between siblings that also enhanced the status of single women.¹⁰⁰ Consider the example of Mary Ker, the never-married woman from Natchez, Mississippi, who devoted her life to the care of her siblings and their offspring. Contemporaries viewed Ker as a woman operating at the heart of the family, keeping the family together when financial and practical difficulties threatened to break it apart. Mary was always generous with her time and money, and on one occasion even sold the family silver to help her brother establish a new business venture in the post-war period.¹⁰¹ “Unmarried sisters were able and willing to aid their brothers, but sometimes they carefully balanced this aid with their desire to assist other relatives. Thus they placed property for married women in trust rather than allowing it to be swallowed up by the husband’s creditors.”¹⁰²

By the late nineteenth century, female property owners had “become the bulwark of the propertied class, helping to bolster husbands or siblings against hard times.”¹⁰³ Single women involved themselves in financial as well as family affairs, and in doing so demonstrated that they were active in the private and also, more public world of the post-war economy. As an unexpected by-product, single women benefited from a bolstered self-confidence and economic agency, for example in the case of Mary Ker from Mississippi. The Civil War did not create a revolution for privileged white women in terms of property relations, as changes were already in motion prior to the war. However it certainly gave rise to additional opportunities for single women.¹⁰⁴

Involuntary Singleness

¹⁰⁰ Censer, *The Reconstruction of Southern Womanhood*, 113.

¹⁰¹ Amy Lin Holley, “‘But One Dependence’: Mary Susan Ker and Southern Public Education 1876–1914” (master’s thesis, University of North Carolina, 1989), 26.

¹⁰² Censer, *The Reconstruction of Southern Womanhood*, 120.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 125

In addition to the legal changes for never-married women and divorcées, another important area that requires attention is widowhood; those women who passed from marriage to singleness due to the death of their husband – involuntarily singleness. Did these women operate within the same framework of gender conventions shared by other single women, and how important was it for them to demonstrate that they were still “virtuous” single women? I will pursue these questions by examining three main sections: the widow’s dower, separate estates, and inheritance. When a woman married it signalled the loss of numerous legal and civil rights, disqualifications and disabilities.

Marriage also introduced certain benefits: protection, provision and the dower. The Law of Dower was an important legal provision that all married women were entitled to. Scholars have likened it to modern day life insurance, in that it was designed to protect and provide for a wife upon her husband’s death by giving her a one third share in her husband’s estate, which of course varied considerably depending upon class, wealth, and status.¹⁰⁵ The dower was intended to be an extension of the protective cover that women experienced (in theory) in marriage, and ensured a minimum amount of provision for women should her husband die, safe from the hands of any creditors, therefore enabling her to provide for herself and children.¹⁰⁶ John James Park, in “A Treatise on the Law of Dower” described it as such:

Technically, under common law the dower came to be defined as an estate for life – in the third part – of the land and tenements – of which the husband was solely seized either in deed or in law – at any time during the coverture – of a legal estate of inheritance – in possession – to which the issue of the wife might by possibility inherit and which the law gives – to every married woman ... who survives her husband – to be enjoyed by such woman...from the death of her husband – whether she have issue by him or not– having for its object the sustenance of herself, and the nurture and education of her children, if any; – the right to which attaches upon the land

¹⁰⁵ Joan Hoff, *Law, Gender, and Injustice*, 106.

¹⁰⁶ The law of dower also held an important function during marriage. As Lebsack points out, a wife was able to “defend” the right to her dower by blocking conveyances. Refer to Lebsack, *Free Women*, 24.

immediately upon the marriage, or as soon after the husband becomes seised – and is incapable of being discharged by the husband without her concurrence.¹⁰⁷

Almost all of the southern states were based on English Common Law, (Louisiana and Texas were the exceptions) that stipulated that the Law of Dower “meant that a widow was entitled to a life interest in one third of the land held by her husband at any time during the marriage.”¹⁰⁸ In practise, widows’ often discovered that they were limited to “a one third share of the real property held by the husband at the time of his death,” which had significant financial repercussions for them. Most state and federal decisions handed down between the 1780s and 1850s claimed to uphold dower rights but within ever narrowing boundaries. In other words, the law (and society) created new ways of limiting a woman’s independence both inside and outside of marriage.¹⁰⁹ Beginning in 1839 in Mississippi, states began to enact legislation overriding the restrictions associated with coverture and the concept of coverture was gradually eroded. Yet, the motivations that resulted in these legal changes were not generated by concerns for equality between the sexes, but by the desire to secure and protect men’s property. Over the course of the nineteenth century the laws of coverture died out, but it was an uneven and patchy process that dovetailed with the Married Women’s Property Acts in the 1830s and 1840s.

Widows sometimes willingly gave up their dower rights in order to pay off debts owed against the estate. Widows also appealed to the courts to be granted permission to hold on to personal property, usually slaves, that they believed were transportable (should they wish to move to another state) and also more profitable. When Rebecca Caven’s husband, Dr. Thomas Elrath, died in December 1825, she petitioned the court, asking for

¹⁰⁷ John James Park, *A Treatise on the Law of Dower; Particularly with a view to the Modern Practise of Conveyancing* (Philadelphia: 1836), 3, quoted in Joan Hoff, *Law, Gender, & Injustice*, 106.

¹⁰⁸ Hoff, *Law, Gender, and Injustice*, 106-107.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 113-115.

them to transfer some of her husband's real estate to Benjamin Bedford (who was the administrator of the estate). It was a shrewd, calculated move on her behalf that demonstrated her clear understanding on the limitations of her dower share. She realised that in her specific circumstances it would be better to trade in her dower share for real estate that she could sell. This would enable her to clear her late husband's debts, as well as providing her with adequate provision for her to live comfortably.¹¹⁰ The court favoured her appeal and in doing so ensured that she remained provided for in her widowhood.

Women primarily showed themselves to be driven by their need for protection, rather than a desire for enhancing personal autonomy when filing their various petitions to the court in the first half the nineteenth century. Widows often relied heavily on their birth families for support and advice, especially in the early days of widowhood. Ruth Hairston relied on the advice of her father, and his years of experience, when she first took on the plantation at Berry Hill. She urged her father: "Dear Papa, rite me every opportunity you have so I may no how to manage for the best."¹¹¹ Likewise, Ellen Shutt kept up a detailed correspondence with her Uncle, George Mordecai throughout her widowhood (and beyond) seeking his advice on financial transactions, on whether or not she should move to another state and, on the care and provision of her children.¹¹² Clearly, widows valued the knowledge and experience of their male kin, particularly when it came to managing farms or larger plantations. They could appeal to men's wider

¹¹⁰ Petition of Rebecca Cavens Mississippi State Legislature, Petitions and Memorials, RSPP, PAR No. 11082504. The petition read, "Rebecca Cavens is entitled to dower in all the real estate of which the late Dr. Thomas K. McGrath her former husband died." She "voluntarily was relinquishing her right to dower in the lands, herein prayed to be disposed of to effect the object of this petition."

¹¹¹ I am aware that this example falls slightly outside of the main period observed in this thesis. However, I use it because it is an excellent example of a letter written from a slaveholding daughter to her father in the early days of her widowhood. Ruth Hairston to Peter Hairston, 29 May 1814, Wilson and Hairston Family Papers, Folder 77, SHC, UNC. For further information on family and widowhood, refer to Chapter Two.

¹¹² George Mordecai Papers, SHC, UNC.

sense of honour and patriarchal protection, thereby replicating male and female gender roles, in establishing support in their early widowhood.

Martha Powell, a widow with six small children under the age of thirteen, and also pregnant with twins, lived on a small farm in Nottoway County, Virginia. Following her husband's death in 1829, she was left in sole charge of "a worn out" farm and eleven 'negroes'. Martha quickly felt overwhelmed with her additional responsibilities, and petitioned the court to grant her permission to sell the farm and move closer to her brothers so that they could support her in her single state. As she admitted in her appeal to the court, "she was unskilled in the management of land and Negroes" and therefore sought permission to remove herself and property, sell the land and farm, and move from Virginia to Alabama, in order to be closer to her birth family, particularly her two brothers who could help her run a farm. She also noted that the farmland in Alabama was sterile and that consequently she was "unable to support herself or family" if she remained living there. By petitioning the court to allow her to sell her land and move her property (slaves) she showed forward thinking and considerable self-motivation and autonomy.

However, Martha demonstrated that she continued to operate in line with established expectations of her gender (and class). Though no recorded result exists for Martha Powell's case, it is likely that her petition was granted, as she had made it clear in her petition that she was requesting the move to best support herself and children, and not because of any ulterior motives.¹¹³ Martha's case also benefited from the support of her brother, who wrote to the court that, "You are well acquainted with the land upon which she resides, you know it is impossible for her to live upon it in comfort (if at all)." Adding, "the distance from me is so great and my confinement by my public duties as

¹¹³ Petition of Martha Powell to General Assembly of Virginia, Legislative Petitions, RSPP, PAR No. 11683002.

such, as to render it out of my power to aid her in the management of her affairs as I wish,” therefore, “by removal to Alabama she will go immediately into the neighbourhood of our two brothers William and Richard Leigh who are very anxious she should move,” which rubber-stamped his approval on her case.¹¹⁴ The case highlights the important place of family in many widows’ lives, in extending their help and support in difficult times, or of family bereavement. Yet, it also underlines the limitations of a widow’s new status as a *femme sole*, in that women still adhered to the ideals of femininity in order to live comfortably in their new life without a husband.

Widowhood could be fraught with pitfalls. In theory, widows were entitled to their dower share of their deceased husband’s estate. However, in practise women often found that ensuring that they obtain their dower share was littered with further complications. Firstly, the business of calculating what exactly amounted to a wife’s dower share, or her third’s share of her deceased husband’s estate was often a complex and protracted affair. In South Carolina an alternative solution was to award widows the “cash equivalent” of their dower. Yet, these so-called “cash dowers” often failed to cover a widow’s long-term expenses in terms of bringing up a family and paying for their children’s education. Even in cases where women did finally get awarded their dower share, it still might prove to be an inadequate provision for her, depending on her wealth and social status.¹¹⁵ For poorer or middle-income families this was a problem, as by the time a widow received her share of the estate it often amounted to very little, and certainly did not cover the expenses that came with raising and educating dependents.¹¹⁶ By the Civil War, widows benefited from a change in the law that meant that they could receive their dower share before creditors claimed their due, which placed them in a much better financial position and hence increased their personal autonomy.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Hoff, *Law, Gender & Injustice*, 106–107.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Widowhood came with a long list of social, economic and personal constraints, but what it did provide was legal autonomy, as wives became widows and in the process, returned them to their single identity of a *femme sole*. Unlike never-married women, widows also benefited from an elevated social status connected to the fact that they had once been married, and therefore had already fulfilled their role as “true” southern women. They were not subject to the same pressures to remarry that never-married women were. In that sense, widows had the freedom to “choose” or “reject” re-marriage according to social, economic and personal needs.¹¹⁷ According to Lebsack, “the wealthier the widow, the less likely she was to remarry” and “widows generally did not remarry if they could afford to remain as they were,” which is a point echoed by Catherine Edwards, a rich slaveholding widow when she stated that “widows are little Queens if they have property... poor widows...get husbands but those who are independent have respect enough without them.”¹¹⁸ Re-marriage, after all was fraught uncertainties, and affluent slaveholding widows had to be mindful of this in order to protect themselves, their property, or any property left in trust for their dependents. The separate estate could be useful to widows, for it offered them an opportunity to ring fence their property from second, or third husbands, therefore keeping it safe if things should go wrong. Husbands were also watchful in protecting their property in the terms set out in their will and clearly stated that a wife would forfeit any rights to his property if she re-married.

When a husband died, there were a number of possible outcomes when it came to his will: first, he could die intestate (without a will), second, he could leave his wife an inheritance as a “fee simple,” which meant leaving everything to her, or third, and

¹¹⁷ Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg*, 26.

¹¹⁸ Ibid & Catherine Edwards to Charles Biddle, 4 July 1805, Catherine Edwards Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina (hereafter cited as SCL).

perhaps most common, he left his wife a “lifetime estate.”¹¹⁹ The distinctions between each type of legacy are very important, each bringing with it certain legal, economic and personal ramifications that affected those left behind. Each will be dealt with in turn. Even if a husband died intestate, the widow was entitled to her dower share, worth one third of the estate, before creditors could claim their due (which was an important change in the law just prior to the Civil War).¹²⁰ For widows who were from a lower social class, this amounted to very little and in reality they seldom benefited from what amounted to a small fiscal reward for what could have been a lifelong marriage. Wealthy widows fared much better, with some women inheriting handsome legacies.

Slaveholder William Burney died intestate in 1817 leaving his wife, Mary Burney, in a quandary. As he had left no written will, half of his estate had been left to the state of Alabama, the state in which they lived. This amounted to a sizeable portion of their estate, which Mary claimed she had helped to build up, almost from scratch. Therefore, if half was escheated to the state, she was left at a serious disadvantage. Mary could have accepted the constraints of her position, but instead, in a sudden drive of determination, and fuelled by her need to survive, she petitioned the court of Alabama, to allow her the “other half” of her husband’s estate, in order to pay his debts and to give her sufficient provision to live comfortably.¹²¹ In doing so, she showed considerable agency despite the constraints that could have easily have constrained her, and prevented her from taking any action. Although no result is recorded for Mary’s case, she clearly demonstrated that she was willing to act pro-actively in an effort to gain the additional portion of the property that was rightfully hers. She was one of many widows to find that she was in such a predicament.

¹¹⁹ This ensured that a wife was adequately provided for but also it limited her from being able to buy and sell property, thus constraining her autonomy, which fitted in with prevalent ideas of femininity that considered women as submissive, passive and dependent. Lebsack, *Free Women*, 42-44.

¹²⁰ Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 62.

¹²¹ Petition of Mary Burney to Alabama Legislature, RSPP, PAR No. 10181701.

Miriam Porter's husband also died intestate in September 1827, leaving his wife to file a petition in order to be granted permission to sell perishable property belonging to the estate, that included, "a considerable number of slaves."¹²² Although a decade separates the two cases, they both demonstrate the limitations of a widow's position and the ways in which southern women tried to overcome them. Elizabeth Saunders, a widow from Tennessee, was also left in unfamiliar circumstances when her husband passed away without leaving a written will. Elizabeth was primarily driven by economic need as the estate had been left in debt by three thousand dollars. Elizabeth approached the courts to pass a law to "authorise the administrator of the estate ... to sell so much of the land" to enable her to clear the debts and also to provide her with adequate funds to bring up and educate her children.¹²³ Again, the common themes of protection and provision run through almost all of the personal testimonies examined in this chapter. Paradoxically it was in the attempt to uphold these conservative values that women also found a route to personal autonomy.

A second option for widows was that they could be bequeathed property in their husband's will, in what was called a "fee simple," which meant that they were given absolute authority over his estate. A widow, who was given an estate as a fee simple, was placed in an extremely powerful and autonomous position. Fee simple estates were more common with widows who were the second or third wives, and also not the mother of their children. Colin Clark, a wealthy Halifax County planter bequeathed his "whole property and estate of which I shall die seized or possessed of consisting of real, personal and mixed property to my beloved wife Eliza L. Clark and her heirs in fee simple forever."¹²⁴ In doing so, Clark proved unequivocally that he had absolute confidence in

¹²² Petition of Miriam Porter to Tennessee Legislature, RSPP, PAR No. 21483004.

¹²³ Petition of Elizabeth Saunders to General Assembly of Tennessee, Legislative Petitions, RSPP, PAR No. 11482203.

¹²⁴ Censer, *The Reconstruction of Southern Womanhood*, 104-105.

his wife's ability to manage a large and profitable estate and he demonstrated his belief by giving her sole responsibility to manage it. Widows, then, could inherit large amounts of property and land through the division of their husbands' estates. By taking on these opportunities, widows understood "the need for domestic authority" and challenged the "inherited idea" that "husbandless women were powerless."¹²⁵

Slaveholding widows donned masterful roles in order for them to be taken seriously while managing large estates, conducting business affairs, and in their management of slaves. It was acceptable for widows to act in this way, because if not, they were easily dismissed as weak or ineffectual managers, and could therefore be taken advantage of.¹²⁶ The inheritance patterns of widows therefore varied considerably according to several factors: "age, capabilities, and willingness to accept responsibilities, rather than simply her gender."¹²⁷ If a wife was youthful, she could be seen as lacking the experience to manage a large plantation or farm; too old and she may herself be less able, or unwilling to take on the physical hardship or added responsibility of taking on such a task. Young widows fell into the category of women most likely to remarry, which would also be a key consideration when writing a will, and husbands would put measures in place to protect their property from being lost or squandered through re-marriage. In the post-war period, men began to demonstrate a growing confidence in their wives, which was reflected in the nature and content of their wills. It was partly linked to the changing

¹²⁵ Merrill D. Smith, "Breaking the Bonds: Marital Discord in Pennsylvania, 1730-1830," reviewed by Michael Grossberg in *The Journal of American History* 79: 4 (1993), 1582.

¹²⁶ Petition of Hetty Jacobs to House of Delegates, RSPP, PAR No. 11682807. Hetty Jacobs was a widow from Richmond City, Virginia who discovered this to her peril. After her husband died, she had ongoing trouble with some of her young female slaves and children, who failed to recognise their mistress's new authority, following their master's death. In a petition filed to the court of Virginia in 1829, Hetty sought permission to "dispose of the slaves belonging to the said estate" in order to pay the debts owing on the estate. She added that she had tried to pass the slaves on, but due to their "character" nobody was willing to take them. Jacobs reported feeling constrained by the "laws of the land" that prevented her from selling them on, without permission. Yet, they were also of no use to her, as "the conduct of the said slaves towards their mistress, the widow of said Jacobs, was so very insolent and every way objectionable as to render it impracticable for her to keep them about her household establishment."

¹²⁷ Censer, *Reconstruction of Southern Womanhood*, 103.

nature of southern society, and to the end of slavery and to a mounting realisation that widows could care for themselves, as many had already demonstrated during the Civil War.

Women could also be left a life estate in their husband's property. This was almost akin to having the property on loan to you, it remained in a widow's safekeeping, but she was also very limited in terms of what she could actually do with it, in terms of buying or selling property, moving slaves to different locations and so on. Take the example of Susanna Hamm, a slaveholding widow from Albemarle County in Virginia who inherited her husband's "entire estate" following his death in 1839. Attached to Susanna's inheritance were a number of important conditions, that restricted her buying and selling land, relocating, or even writing a will. Also, because it was "a lifetime estate," further stipulations stripped her of the property if, for example, she re-married. Further more, she had no control over whom the estate would be passed on to when she died. Elijah had already clearly stated that, "it is my will and desire that my estate be equally divided among all my children except my son," for reasons that he did not make apparent.¹²⁸ Third, and perhaps most importantly, Susanna filed a petition to the court to enable her to sell "eight or nine hundred acres of land...at seven or eight dollars an acre," rather than selling the slaves as stipulated in Elijah's will. She defended her position well, maintaining that they were "family Negroes" and "could not be easily spared" because the family relied on their labours "to support and maintain the petitioner's younger children."¹²⁹ Clearly, Susanna's plea fell on sympathetic ears, as a bill was drawn in support of her case. Once again, the undercurrent of protection and provision runs through her heartfelt petition requesting the court's permission to remove the constraints placed upon her through her husband's inheritance. Her case clearly demonstrates the ongoing restrictions placed on

¹²⁸ Petition of Susanna Hamm to General Assembly of Virginia, Legislative Petitions, RSPP, PAR No. 11683915.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

slaveholding women that extended from marriage into widowhood, and the way in which patriarchy exercised some control over single women's lives.

Hetty Jacobs, a Virginian widow, fought similar restrictions during her widowhood ten years earlier in 1829. Hetty clearly believed she had no option other than to address the court to gain the right to sell her slaves (rather than land) to invest in bank stock. In her particular case, Hetty was frustrated and disillusioned by the "insolence" of some of her slaves, who failed to respect her authority as a female slaveholder; therefore she filed a petition so that she could sell them. Hers stood out as a more unusual case, as virtually all of the petitions explored in this chapter, involved slaveholding widows wanting to sell land, rather than slaves, which they considered to be of more long-term value. Yet, Hetty's case was atypical in that her desire to sell some of her slaves was driven by the fact that they were causing her a great deal of trouble and hence she believed she had no other options open to her. They were disrespectful, "insolent" and they also failed to recognise her as their female master, which left her with little choice except to sell them, so that she could re-invest the capital elsewhere. As her petition makes plain, her husband had not released sufficient funds to satisfy all demands against the estate, which forced her into action in an attempt to remedy the situation.¹³⁰ The courts thus determined her fate, and Jacobs like many other single, slaveholding women, learnt that even if she were free of the patriarchal control of her husband, she was still beholden to the paternalism of the southern justice system that was controlled and operated by men.

Widows quickly discovered that their petitions relied heavily on the discretion of the courts, and therefore, much like the cases of women seeking a divorce, widows learnt to frame their petitions in a way that would gain them maximum sympathy from the judicial body. In this way widows demonstrated that they were able to manipulate the gender

¹³⁰ Petition of Hetty Jacobs to the General Assembly of Virginia, RSPP, PAR No. 11682901.

conventions that controlled them, returning again to the notion of “quiet revolutionaries.”¹³¹ They were expected to live up to certain prescriptions of femininity in order to get them what they wanted. Whilst widows addressed the courts on a broad range of grievances, the most common focused on land and slaves. From Virginia, Texas, Mississippi and Tennessee, widows spoke of their need to sell land in exchange for the payment of debts, or to nullify provisions in their husband’s will that prevented them from receiving adequate support.¹³²

Other widows, including Caroline Johnson, requested to move a minor’s personal property from one state to another, in her case from Texas to South Carolina, where she now resided.¹³³ Widows validated their claims for removal by highlighting the need to protect a dependent’s property. Martha Powell wanted to relocate from Virginia to Alabama, in order to be closer to her birth family, and appealed for a law to be passed to give her permission to take her slaves with her.¹³⁴ In 1843, slaveholding widow Martha Orgain, from Surry County, filed a petition in order to gain permission to move her son’s property (he was a minor and had inherited “considerable property in lands, slaves, horses and cattle”) to “more fertile lands” that she claimed would benefit them both. Martha’s son had in excess of “two hundred slaves” in Surry and James City counties, which she described as an “exceedingly poor,” “unproductive, and unhealthy” environment.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 13.

¹³² Petition of Elizabeth Carter to General Assembly of Tennessee, RSPP, PAR No. 114801106. Elizabeth Carter, a slaveholding widow from Tennessee requested that the court “pass a law to empower her to sell so much of the land belonging to the estate of the deceased as will be sufficient to pay off the debts due.” Petition of Mary Larkins to General Assembly of Tennessee, RSPP PAR No. 11484601. In January 1846, Mary Larkins the white, female widow of slaveholder Spencer Hunt sought to “nullify a provision in his will giving a large portion of his estate of the common schools in Humphrey and Dickinson Counties.” Petition of Rebecca Cavens to Mississippi State Legislature, RSPP PAR No. 11082504. She asked permission to sell land rather than slaves.

¹³³ Petition of Caroline Johnson to Texas Legislature, RSPP, PAR No. 11584020. The result of her case is recorded as “unknown”.

¹³⁴ Petition of Martha Powell to General Assembly of Virginia, Legislative Petitions, RSPP, PAR No. 11683002.

¹³⁵ Petition of Martha Orgain to General Assembly of Virginia, Legislative Petitions, RSPP, PAR No. 11684203.

Martha flexed a small degree of personal agency in voicing her aspirations to move the slaves to another state where the conditions would be better suited to their prosperity. Martha noted that the slaves were mostly in family groups, and therefore she wished to keep them together, as “hiring” them out would involve splitting them up, which she felt would be disadvantageous. Although, she seems to have had a clear knowledge of what would work best, she had no legal authority to ensure this course of events. As noted in her petition, “If she were authorised, with a portion of the profits already accrued” from the sale of the land, she would “purchase more fertile lands in a healthier part of the state for him” and remove the slaves as well. Martha’s case met with some success, as the recorded result was that “a bill was drawn” but we know little more than this. Martha’s case reverberates with the experience of other slaveholding widows, who discovered that wealthy planters tended to exhibit a heightened conservatism when writing their wills for their wives, partly due to the fact that there was more at stake.

In the post-war years, men’s confidence in their wives ability to manage large estates, presumably as a response to their successful management in the war years, was increasingly reflected in widows settling their husband’s estates that demonstrated the heightened agency of single women in terms of property law. As Censer points out, husbands increasingly trusted wives to settle estates, and to divide them amongst their children and families. Widows of the old elite were able to exercise their own personal judgement on who would benefit from their legacies; and they often demonstrated that they felt more confident in stating their posthumous wishes than when they were alive. Widows could ensure that their daughters, close sisters, or nieces were well provided for in a manner that revealed self-action and autonomy. Amanda and Josephine Varner were sisters who lived together running the family hotel in Indian Springs, Georgia for half a century. When Amanda Varner died in 1915, she bequeathed all of her property “both

real and personal” to her sister, Joe Varner, which amounted to everything except a small lot of land in the town of Indian Springs and “a milch cow” to her friend, Mrs. A. H. Ogletree.”¹³⁶

Additionally, parents started to view unmarried daughters in a new light, which was reflected in the type of provision left for them, such as in the case for the Holladay sisters. This helped alter less favourable perceptions of single women. Women took their new roles seriously; they invested time and energy in writing their wills, often bearing in mind those individuals who were most deserving or needy, in what Lebsack describes as personalism.¹³⁷ This is well illustrated in Mary Ker’s will, penned in December 1870. She averred, “I have made this disposition of my property according to my judgement and feelings combined,” in determining who she would leave her property and personal belongs to.¹³⁸ These enhanced property rights for single women were another clear indication that single women’s lives were gradually changing in the way that they were perceived by others, in their family, and in the place they had carved for themselves in southern society. For slaveholding women, the acquisition of personal wealth was important because it gave them the protection needed to survive as women on their own in the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

In the antebellum South, the gradual process of legal reform in women’s lives had already begun. In Mississippi, as early as 1839, the passing of the Married Women’s Property Act led to a series of legal reforms that one by one expanded married women’s property rights. The reasons that motivated these changes in law and property rights were often germinated

¹³⁶ Last Will and Testament of Miss Amanda Varner, 24 March 1915, Edward Varner Family Papers, Varner Family Legal Papers, 1827-1928, GHS.

¹³⁷ Lebsack, *Free Women*, Chapter 5.

¹³⁸ Memorandum to Mamie and Nellie, 20 December 1871, Mary Susan Ker Papers, SHC.

in conservative soil, and driven by financial concerns for men regarding the best way to protect their own property from debtors. At the same time, the Married Women's Property Acts were also about the protection of women and were meant to provide them with a safety net should things go wrong. Each time a new state passed a law that gave women additional rights over property in marriage, it also had important implications for single women.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the law of coverture had clearly defined the differences between a single and married woman, but as the century wore on, and coverture gradually died out, those differences started to become less apparent. Prior to the Civil War, married women's property laws were concerned with equity procedures; in other words, they dealt with women's specific grievances in marriage or widowhood, but did little to modify a husband's privileges granted to him via prior common law principles. After the Civil War, laws became more concerned with altering property relations between husband and wife, which had serious repercussions for single women. This included women who were voluntarily single, such as the never-married or divorced, and women who were involuntarily single, such as widows.

The expansion of property laws for women, "ranged from the simple ability of wives to write wills with or without their husbands' consent, to granting femme sole status to abandoned women, to allowing women some control over their own wages, to establishing separate estates for women, to protecting land inherited by widows from their husbands' creditors, to allowing widows legal access to their husbands' personal estates."¹³⁹ In theory, these were extremely important measures that over time gradually helped women free themselves from unhappy marital unions, in which they were either mentally or physically abused, or were poorly provided for by their partners. The steady broadening of

¹³⁹ Hoff, *Law, Gender and Injustice*, 128.

the divorce laws in the South, and especially what constituted acceptable grounds for divorce, were again significant measures that signalled an evolving attitude towards women's roles and status.

However, the changes were often patchy and the actual interpretation and implementation of the law varied according to custom and beliefs of those individuals in power. These changes often occurred slowly and haltingly, and for the most part were motivated by an ethos of patriarchal control, in that wives still had to prove that they were the innocent victims, confined in marital unions that failed to provide for them, thereby allowing a higher patriarchal body (of the law) to step in and take control. By the time of the Civil War, changes were already afoot as is evidenced by the Married Women's Property Acts and the gradual broadening of the divorce laws in states such as Tennessee or Alabama (with a wider interpretation of the concept of cruelty).

The Civil War expedited these legal changes, as the status of single women became more acceptable, and the trends of romantic love and the companionate marriage ideal blossomed further still. Men had also experienced how their wives had coped during the war, and for some this convinced them that their wives were able managers of their plantations who could be trusted as safe keepers of their family property in the event of their death. For slaveholding women, the brutalities of war had magnified the fact that men could not always protect them, and the end of race based slavery that came crashing down at the war's end and the emancipation of the slaves, also challenged the rigid definitions of southern womanhood that further eroded at the gender ideals of men and women, particularly those from the slaveholding elite. Men had failed to protect their women in wartime, and by the end of the war, when the slaves walked away from the plantation, the antebellum worldview based on a racial and gendered hierarchy crumbled.

The two key themes of provision and protection run through virtually all of the petitions filed by men and women in this chapter. Women's divorce petitions stemmed in part from the growing desire and expectation of having a more companionate marriage, and when they found that their marriage fell short of this new model, they began complaining about it. Women showed their agency in voicing discontent with adulterous husbands, who drank, lied or squandered property. As the divorce rate steadily rose by the late nineteenth century, women appeared to achieve greater success in voluntarily regaining their single status, which was mirrored by the increasingly liberal divorce laws, that sprang up from state to state. Until this point, female agency had been limited to women working within the constraints of nineteenth-century gender roles, which varied from state to state. If women wanted to voluntarily regain their single status (through divorce), it was important that they demonstrated an adherence to the accepted models of femininity that dominated the South. This was a constraint, but if handled correctly – an opportunity to manipulate the system – in order to ensure their petitions were passed. After all, women wanted to ensure that, if a divorce petition was passed, they were also provided with adequate provision or alimony to ensure economic survival. There was little comfort in gaining a divorce, if a woman was going to be left in a worse situation than she was in during marriage.

Property ownership and the law often overlapped. This was particularly evident at the end of the Civil War, when many previously wealthy, slaveholding families were left financially devastated by Confederate defeat and the loss of their slave property after emancipation. This was mirrored in a decline in the percentage of dowable lands, which lessened in line with the social, economic and political changes caused by the Civil War. However, the setting up of separate estates invariably protected women from financial devastation and cushioned this loss. As women like Ruth Balderee discovered, her

decision to set up a separate estate prior to marriage had been a decision that later protected her, by enabling her to leave her husband, without being left financially destitute. For widows, the advantages of having a separate estate could also be of immeasurable value to them, both financially and personally. Primarily it sheltered them from the worst excesses of economic deprivation if they faced a life alone, in the event of the death of their husband.

The relationship between single women, property and the law was constantly evolving throughout the nineteenth century. In theory, single women had the power to act as a *femme sole*, which placed them in a more advantageous position than married women. However, in reality, single women, particularly those who had been married and then who had voluntarily sought a divorce, soon learnt that their quest to return to their former status as *femme sole* largely depended on whether or not they were perceived as having acted like “true women.” Widows and divorcees often discovered that there was a lag between what they were told their rights were, and how these rights were actually implemented or interpreted in different jurisdictions. In the number of divorce petitions filed and examined in this study alone, it is clear that the autonomy of the “*femme sole*” was subject to numerous social and cultural restrictions that operated as much to restrain her power as for married women in the early part of the century. The easiest way that a woman could gain some modicum of agency in the southern states, prior to the Civil War at least, was to abide strictly to its codes of appropriate feminine behaviour, that connected back to the ideal models of womanhood. Even if women were seen as a “*femme sole*” in the eyes of the law, such as in the case of involuntarily singleness or widowhood, it was still important that she continued to adhere to the social prescriptions of true womanhood that bound married women to it. If a woman was single, she was expected to show that she championed the ideals of domesticity and to show she believed that marriage and

motherhood came first. If a woman had never married, it was important that she was prepared to show her “usefulness” as a single woman by embracing the ideals of single blessedness. For a widow this could be achieved by demonstrating “virtuous widowhood” and in divorce by highlighting the fact that a woman had been a good wife and an innocent victim of a cruel and barbarous husband.

If women wanted to gain acceptance, respect and some modicum of personal agency prior to the Civil War in particular, the vehicle to help achieve this was by showing an adherence to prevalent models of southern womanhood even in its broadest sense. An unattached planter woman was bound to the larger patriarchy of the South, even if she was not married, or had never been married. She therefore had to operate within the strict limitations and gender conventions of her time, even when it came to suing in court, petitioning for her dower share or for a divorce from her barbarous husband, if she was to have any hope of success. By working within these rigid confines, women who were single or who wanted to be single gradually chipped away at the existing frameworks of power. This led to an increase in personal autonomy, albeit slowly. This was helped by the profound social, economic, political, and demographic changes accelerated by war that culminated in important changes in the law in the post-war period. It also helped to expand and revise the boundaries of true womanhood, which elasticised in the post-war period, to include new versions of “true womanhood” into its remit. This included those women who embraced the Cult of Single Blessedness and those “tens of thousands” of new widows born of wartime.¹⁴⁰ As a result, these slow but steady advances began to filter through, and make tangible changes to single women’s lives, which again mirrored the altered social and cultural scene post-Reconstruction.

¹⁴⁰ Jennifer Lynn Gross, “‘And for the Widow and Orphan’: Confederate Widows, Poverty and Public Assistance,” in *Inside the Confederate Nation*, ed. Lesley J. Gordon & John C. Inscoe (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 210.

Conclusion

The Civil War and post-war years have been described as “a crisis in gender,” a period of time marked by “the reconstruction of white southern womanhood.”¹ For single, slaveholding women the process of challenging traditional models of southern womanhood had begun in the Old South. This was because single women by virtue of their non-marriage already chafed against the rigid ideologies of gender that existed for their class and race.

The evidence in this study suggests that single planter class women disguised their departure from traditional gender models, which required them to marry and have children, by making themselves indispensable to the family unit or within their local communities. Single women’s roles in the family replicated conventional gender roles for women as caregivers, helpmeets or maiden aunts, which coalesced with traditional notions of nineteenth-century femininity. This was partially out of choice, and in part out of necessity. By demonstrating an outward compliance with the Cult of Domesticity or True Womanhood, single women improved their self-image in southern society, gained acceptance, respect, and paradoxically, a route to greater autonomy. In the antebellum world, old attitudes of social scorn towards unmarried females remained, but they were slowly being replaced by new ideas of single blessedness that had particularly taken root in the urban centres.²

In these areas, networks of single women gradually sprung up as early as the 1830s. For elite, white women who came from wealthy slaveholding families, the advantages of

¹ Lee-Ann Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta Georgia 1860-1890* (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 1995) & Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2003). Others have described it in similar terms such as Laura Edwards’ *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). Historians such as Anya Jabour have manipulated the image of Scarlett O’ Hara, the fictional character in *Gone with the Wind* and fleshed out the image by use of real examples of southern women in the Civil War and post-war years. They demonstrate the changes in southern women’s lives and in the altered model of southern femininity in the era of Reconstruction.

² Christine Jacobsen Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness: Unmarried Women in the Urban South 1800-1865* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

their social class and race position granted them certain privileges over lower class whites and blacks.³ As a result they benefited from the advantages of their elevated social position that afforded them the opportunity to reject marriage, but still continue to show that they were useful members of their families or communities, which enhanced other people's perception of their femininity. However, it was critical that these women clearly understood the importance of patriarchy in their lives that was perhaps most defined by their role in the family. To repeat again the words of Jane Turner Censer, the planter class "emphasized the persistence of the metaphor of family as appropriate representation for various social relations," that supported race, class and gender hierarchies.⁴ It was about more than *just* the family; it was also about the overarching patriarchy of southern society.

Within this rigid context of race, class and gender, slaveholding women were able to form close and loving relationships with other single women. Prior to the Civil War, the model of white, southern womanhood helped to disguise the true nature of female friendship, and evidence suggests that single women found considerable freedom in their relationships with other women. This was because of the dominant ideology that perceived women to be non-sexual and pure. If this argument is followed, then the relationships shared between single women could be nothing more than innocent. In fact, society often saw them as a useful distraction to prevent unmarried women becoming a burden on society. As the examples in this thesis reveal, the form and function of female friendship was considered non-threatening, which allowed these friendships to develop and blossom in the first half of the century. Often friendships between women were perceived as only temporary and therefore were considered to have no real chance of maturing into a more permanent form.⁵

³ Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1-15.

⁴ Censer, "Sarah Gayle and Her Family," 18-19.

⁵ Anya Jabour, *Female Families and Friendship in the Old South* (Tampa: University of Florida Press: 2009), 86-103.

The Civil War altered the social and economic fabric of many planter class families. As Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation eventually freed four million slaves in the South, planters watched on in horror as their property and wealth literally ebbed away from them.⁶ As a consequence, the nature of the southern family altered significantly, which led to a growing acceptance within the old elite that it was acceptable for single women to pursue paid work in certain occupations, such as teaching.⁷ This in many respects proved to be a double-edged sword as it acted as a springboard for female autonomy in the workplace, but at the same time started to threaten the male hegemony as women gained more independence.

The drive for women's work thus came from a conservative ethos tied to the preservation of the southern family. However, in the post-war years, the transition to paid work also threatened conventional models of femininity. By the mid-to-late 1870s, new theories of female sexuality challenged the idea that women were asexual. New interpretations of female sexuality dismissed previously held notions that women were by nature passionless.⁸ This had a significant effect on female friendship between single women because they were no longer viewed as non-sexual and pure. In addition to this, in the post-war years their friendships also had the capacity to become more permanent because of the possibility (and necessity) of paid work.⁹

Work was another important marker in slaveholding women's lives. Undoubtedly the war intensified social change in elite women's lives, as it forced them, on an unprecedented scale, to respond to the needs of the Confederacy. However, the war was not a watershed

⁶ Christine Jacobsen Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness*, 183.

⁷ Victoria Ott, *Confederate Daughters: Coming of Age during the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

⁸ Nancy Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," *Signs: Journal of Woman and Culture and Society* 4:2 (1978) & Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Women and her role in Nineteenth Century America," *Journal of American History* 60 (1973/74).

⁹ Jabour, *Female Families*, 86-103.

moment as some historians argue.¹⁰ I would describe it more as a catalyst that accelerated social changes that had already begun in the antebellum era. Single women successfully managed large plantations in the absence of their husbands from the early 1800s. In so doing, they clearly demonstrated an adherence to upholding conventional ideals of femininity. Kirsten Wood describes this as widows' manipulation of ladyhood.¹¹ This thesis argues that again, single women used their femininity as a disguise in order to successfully manage plantations, whilst simultaneously adopting new characteristics and manner that were required for them to do so effectively. In other words, by being seen to operate within gender lines, widows inadvertently gained greater autonomy.

In terms of the other two main working roles discussed in this study, nursing and teaching, it is clear that the foundations for these roles were sown in the antebellum South. These vocations expanded out of fairly traditional nurturing and care giving roles that were already present in the pre-war South. They had their roots in the southern family and rapidly expanded into a more public arena during the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. The war therefore acted as a catalyst for expediting an expansion or more accurately, a transition of women's traditional home-based roles and transposed them into a public setting. The war required women to develop a new set of feminine characteristics in support of southern independence, which, rather paradoxically meant that the ideal model of southern womanhood had to be revised or expanded.

The Civil War therefore helped to re-shape traditional notions of what constituted femininity in a changing South, highlighting trends that had already begun in the antebellum era. As Anastasia Simms suggests, the Southern Lady diversified during the Civil War and

¹⁰ For example see, Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

¹¹ Kirsten E. Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

“different elements of her character” were emphasised to “suit different circumstances.”¹² For women who were single this included their ability to be self-reliant, brave and stoic, particularly in their work as nurses on the front line. For women like Phoebe Yates Pember, who worked as a Confederate nurse, it was important that women demonstrated that they could be “hard and gross” in their working lives, not as a challenge to patriarchal authority, but in order to do their job well.¹³ Unmarried women had more flexibility and manoeuvrability than their married counterparts (as they did not have homes and families of their own) and therefore they were able to step into certain wartime roles more easily than married women were, which had both immediate and, longer-term consequences.

Firstly, it proved that unmarried women could be “useful” to their communities and devoted to the Confederate cause. It drew attention to the burgeoning trend of single blessedness that had taken root in the Old South but which came into sharper focus in wartime. As Lee Chambers-Schiller argues, the Cult of Single Blessedness reached it heyday in the South during wartime, meaning that women born in the 1840s and 1850s benefited most from the opportunities it opened up for them.¹⁴ Some women, like the domestic novelist Augusta Jane Evans, celebrated it as an opportunity for single, southern women to cement their new place in post-war society as respectable, southern women. She even used it as a framework for her wartime novel, *Macaria*.¹⁵ In doing so, she championed the view that the war and its aftermath demanded a reconsideration of women’s roles and a broadening of the boundaries of true womanhood.¹⁶ As Jennifer Lynn Gross suggests, “Evans was not a feminist visionary, she was a social visionary. Recognising the plight the war had created for

¹² Anastasia Simms, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women’s Organisations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press), 2.

¹³ Pember, *A Southern Woman’s Story*, 105.

¹⁴ Lee Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780-1840* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 22-28.

¹⁵ Jennifer Lynn Gross, “‘Lonely Lives are not Necessarily Joyless’: Augusta Jane Evans’s *Macaria* and the Creation of a Place for Single Womanhood in the Postwar South,” *American Nineteenth Century History* Vol 2:1 (Spring 2001): 33-52.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46-49.

Southern women, she suggested a solution – an expansion of the definition of true womanhood to allow those women who could never marry to find usefulness and social acceptance in their lives as manless women.”¹⁷ It was almost as if she was suggesting that single blessedness should also include other categories of unmarried women, including widows. Therefore, it is clear that the war had a liberating effect on single women’s lives, in terms of not only the way that they were viewed, but also in regard to the opportunities and obstacles which they faced as unmarried women.

Secondly, the longer-term impact of single women’s wartime work was that it expanded women’s opportunities to find self-fulfilment in work. In a post-war South that was scarred by military defeat, demographic loss, material, and cultural devastation, the reality was that women were often required to fill certain post-war roles (such as teaching and nursing). Women from the elite class found that their lives had altered beyond recognition by the end of the war. Many spoke of the changed routine of their daily lives and their contribution to the household chores in the absence of the slaves. Although this was difficult at first, women quickly fostered a new sense of satisfaction and pride in their work in a way that they had not expected to before the war. As slaveholding families suddenly became families without slaves, the altered racial and class dynamics affected the social dynamic of southern women’s lives in the type of work they did, but more importantly in the breakdown of the rigid boundaries of femininity. The changes brought by war meant that a new generation of women started to work to earn a living, in order to supplement their families’ income and to make ends meet. The initial motivation for the expansion of single women’s working roles therefore sprung from a conservative ethos of protection and provision for their families, but also resulted in the gradual breakdown of patriarchy, and with it a revised version of the Southern Lady.

¹⁷ Ibid., 48.

The Civil War therefore had a dual significance for slaveholding women:– it challenged gender roles but also the patriarchy that was already creaking under the strain of emancipation. For slaveholding women, defeat in the Civil War not only brought with it the end of race-based slavery, it also challenged the conventional definition of southern womanhood. For the typical plantation mistress, who had benefited from her position at the centre of the family, the post-war years posed a combination of threat and insecurity to her elevated status in the southern hierarchy. Yet for the single, slaveholding mistress, the war should be considered in a different light, since she already proved to be an inexact fit with the existing models of southern femininity.

The war and post-war years can be interpreted as an opportunity to further accelerate the pace of social change for single women. For them it was less of a “crisis of gender” but more of an opportunity for self-fulfilment and an opportunity to be recognised and praised for the good deeds done. It seized upon the notion that single women of various descriptions could still be valuable and useful members of the family, community and country, in spite of being single. As so many more women were left to manage alone in wartime, the perceptions of female singleness were forced to change in line with altered circumstances. The war shone a bright light on single women’s lives and highlighted the fluidity of the boundaries between married and single women – such as in the case of widows and divorcees.

Finally, when it came to the area of the law, changes were beginning to filter through from the antebellum era, which helped improve the status of single women. These changes included the right to hold property in the form of a separate estate that resulted from the Married Women’s Property Acts (the most important in 1848). These led to improvements in the property rights of married women and, in turn, had important ramifications for widows and divorcées especially. It started a wave of important legislation, which allowed women to hold on to any property owned, or given to them, prior to marriage, in the form of a separate

estate. The initial motivation behind these reforms had little to do with granting women additional independence, but was focused on the protection of male property from potential debtors in hard times. Nevertheless, the long-term by-product was that it generated a measured increase in personal autonomy for women.

Again, in the case of divorce, piecemeal changes had begun prior to the Civil War period, but still the number of women who sought a divorce remained low. In the early nineteenth century the grounds for divorce were narrow, and because of this, women often found that they were dependent on their own jurisdiction's interpretation of events. In the antebellum period, it was imperative that married women proved that they had been a good wife and lived up to the tenets of true womanhood, in spite of their husband's cruel or unjust treatment of them. The courts therefore emulated the patriarchy of the South in that they showed empathy to elite women who demonstrated that they were dependent, pure and submissive in their behaviour.

In the post-war period, the legal changes began to slowly reflect the breakdown of patriarchy that was inextricably intertwined with slavery and that had been extinguished by defeat in the Civil War. This was reflected in a slow but steady rise in the divorce rate, that correlated to the broadening of the grounds of divorce that led to married women voluntarily returning to their "femme sole" status more easily.

A similar pattern is clear in the plight of widows seeking protection from the courts in order to receive their dower share in their husbands' estate. In the antebellum period, widows again had to prove that they were worthy of the court's protection and that they were acting in the best interest of their deceased husband or for their family, as opposed to self-interest. In other words by operating within traditional gender conventions, widows ensured a route to enhanced personal autonomy secured by economic or material resources. Even though the percentage of dowable lands fell after the Civil War, this was counterbalanced by benefits of

the married women's property acts and the separate estates for women that afforded them both protection and enhanced personal agency.

The route to personal autonomy for single, white slaveholding women was not always a straightforward one. Unlike any other group of southern women, the Southern Lady was upheld as an ideal and a myth that few women could really attain. It was a social construct that was designed to uphold the elevated social status of the planter class, a rich and privileged minority of white slave owners in the antebellum South. However, unlike the slaveholding mistress who was revered as the central figure in the southern family, the single woman was an uneasy fit in the cultural stereotype that dominated. In the Old South, single women in some cases remained a figure of scorn, the redundant woman who had failed in her duty to become a southern wife and mother. Increasingly though, this stereotype was slowly disappearing in favour of a new image of single blessedness that promoted the idea that, whilst not all women could marry, they could still be useful members of their families and communities.

As traditional ideas of marriage as a means to retain wealth in the southern family, were gradually challenged by more enlightened ideas of marriage for love and companionate marriage, so too did women begin to question their own choice of marriage partners. By the turn of the Civil War, these two ideas gained pace and women began to delay or reject marriage, as they felt increasingly less concerned about remaining single. The Civil War led to a cultural re-assessment of singleness that coalesced with the new economic challenges and demographic alterations. The war acted as a catalyst for accelerating important trends that were already present, and it blurred the boundaries between marriage and non-marriage. Ultimately, defeat in the Civil War led to the end of slavery and with it a re-consideration of gender roles. In the post-war period the southern lady no longer existed, and she was replaced by a new generation of women whose lives were no longer marked by slavery. For

single women, the end of the war marked the continuation of a process that had begun many years before, and which led to new opportunities that were a pathway to female autonomy.

Abbreviations

Southern Historical Society.....	SHC
Georgia Historical Society.....	GHS
South Caroliniana Library.....	SCL
South Carolina Historical Society.....	SCHS
Virginia Historical Society.....	VHS
Special Collections, Duke University.....	DU

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 Holt Family Papers
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